



Government  
Communication  
Service

# Modern Media Operation

## A Guide

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# Foreword by Alex Aiken

## Executive Director of Government Communications



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

**Alex Aiken**

Executive Director of Government  
Communications

Media relations is at the heart of government communication. Our teams work every day to explain the policies and services of government departments and agencies. The range and scope of this activity is unique, from the daily parliamentary ‘Lobby’ and televised press briefings, the critical work of public health communicators, through to the work of DWP and HM Revenue & Customs explaining our welfare and tax policies, to the activity of our Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office communications staff all around the world.

The media is our vital partner to create public understanding of the aims of government and build the trust that the public place in our services. This partnership requires highly skilled media officers who can understand the purpose, components and rules guiding our work.

The media has a duty to hold government to account and our media teams should promote, explain and justify the policies of the government accurately. They should do so creatively, and must be prepared to speak with honesty and on the basis of professional expertise and evidence, to advise ministers and officials on the best approach to meet the needs of the media and achieve the objectives of the government.

Media relations professionals across government deal with issues of the highest importance, whether that be national security, public health and hospitals, schools, prisons, the economy or international affairs. They are at the forefront of communicating policy and responding to events across all of these issues, playing a vital role in informing the public and supporting the delivery of every aspect of policy and service provision.

Our media teams are acknowledged as talented, capable, motivated and high-performing.

This updated guide, first published in 2017, is about recognising and capturing the best practice that exists across GCS, to ensure our media teams remain the best anywhere in the world at what they do, while also continuing to work effectively with colleagues in communications disciplines such as strategy, campaigns and digital. This guide, and the commitments Heads of News have made in it, will help ensure our media teams keep up with the ever-changing media landscape evolving around us.

There is nothing here that the vast majority of teams are not already doing – and doing very well – but we need to keep improving. We need to work at pace, become expert in generating content, routinely evaluate and understand how technology will carry on changing the media industry. But the most important set of skills that media relations teams need to have is that aimed at building trustful relationships – with ministers, with policy and operational colleagues in the Civil Service and, of course, with journalists and commentators.

To continue to enjoy their rightful and traditional place at the heart of government and public sector communications, media relations professionals throughout GCS must be alert to the future as well as the present, and be confident and influential in managing relationships and expectations with ministers and senior colleagues.

I am certain that my current and future GCS media professional colleagues will rise to this challenge, and I endorse this guide as a key resource from which to build capability, share best practice and reach towards even higher standards.

# Introduction from Heads of News

We know that officials and ministers across government hold the skills our teams offer in high regard. That is why Heads of News worked together to compile this guide and are committed to sharing and encouraging the best practice it highlights. We commend this guide to media officers and communications professionals across the GCS and will use it to build professional skills and pride in our service.

‘Press relations’ was the first element of the Ministry of Information when government communication came into being in 1917. Its continuing importance to government illustrates the central role it has played, and will play, in maintaining trust between government and the public through reporting, analysis and discussion in the national, regional, international and online media.



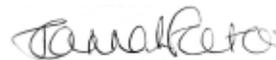
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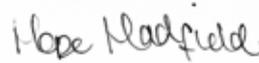
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No.10  
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Official Spokesperson  
and No.10 Head of News

# Introduction

Media relations in Whitehall have come a long way since the first publication of the Modern Communications Operating Model (MCOM). Across GCS, media offices, news teams and media centres are working proactively with campaigns and digital colleagues, evaluating their work, planning future communications strategically and dealing with reactive issues and events. In doing so, media teams have remained at the forefront of the GCS profession. Invariably the first port of call for ministers, media teams operate at a frenetic pace under the spotlight of a truly unrelenting breaking news cycle, fuelled by the rise of social and digital media consumption. Never has this been more the case than in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's departure from the European Union.

## The purpose of this guide is to:

- identify benchmarks for the skills and capabilities that a successful media relations team can provide to its parent organisation and ministers
- provide awareness to key stakeholders (e.g. permanent secretaries, special advisers, ministers, policy/operational colleagues) of the services provided, and value added, by a modern media team
- outline in clear terms the key functional elements of modern media operations, and promote retaining and attracting top talent to create and maintain a culture of constant innovation and flexibility to respond to the latest media trends
- encourage the sharing of best practice between media relations and GCS teams across departments and Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs)

MCOM, published by GCS in the autumn of 2015, laid down the key principles of how public sector media teams should operate. The essential premise is that each department/ALB requires a media operation to set the external agenda rather than simply follow it. The model then lists practical ways to achieve this, including:

- delivering long-term government messages as outlined in the latest Government Communications Plan
- horizon scanning and planning to plot and assess potential coverage in advance
- creating and seeding stories strategically to showcase policy strategy and operational delivery
- highly responsive reactive handling capability to explain policy and spike inaccuracy before publication
- evaluation of output based on sentiment, message penetration and driving behaviour change or consumer action, rather than volume of coverage as the most basic measure of success

As a body of professional communicators, the GCS uses a range of media to reach audiences with the right mix of communications. We reach people directly through stakeholders, paid-for media or marketing and direct communications to people through digital and social channels. However, the reality is that established media outlets – print, online and broadcast – remain powerful actors in shaping how the public think and feel about government policy, and what they do as a result.

# Media reach data

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The GCS has collated figures for the reach and consumption of the following types of media:

- national
- digital: desktop and mobile
- national multi-platform readership
- regional
- nations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland)
- ethnic minority groups
- national media supplements

The reach of established news platforms is still significant, as is the potential impact. The capacity of government departments and agencies to deliver their mandates still depends, to a large extent, on their reputation in the media, whether national, regional or international. Ministers, chief executives, senior policy makers and operational colleagues understand this very clearly, which is why they invariably have extremely high expectations of the media relations teams in their departments.

Running an efficient operation in their departments is a key factor in winning and maintaining their confidence. Indeed, a first-class media operation creates the space and freedom to manoeuvre for other communications disciplines across the wider team.

The increasing use of social and digital media channels by departments and ALBs has undoubtedly increased their ability to speak directly to the public through channels such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. Many departments now have hundreds of thousands of followers on their Twitter and Facebook accounts, with impressive reach and engagement rates for key announcements and communications campaigns. Social and digital channels are increasingly used in this context to communicate with key journalists and stakeholders, as well as the public through initiatives like news and media blogs on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk), which are promoted through Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Therefore, with certain demographics increasingly switching off from traditional channels, ensuring audiences are successfully reached using influencer and other stakeholder channels as a source of direct engagement is of increasing importance alongside wider media engagement.

## Trust in different forms of media

YouGov polling data from April 2020 shows that the news brand with the highest reported trust was the BBC (64%), followed by ITV (60%) and Channel 4 News (59%).

The Financial Times, local and regional newspapers, the Guardian, Sky News and other 'upmarket' newspapers also had relatively high levels of trust in news (between 55% and 44%).

Trust figures were lower for news in 'mid-market' and red-top tabloid newspapers where figures fell to under 30%, and 19% for BuzzFeed and 16% for the Sun.

<https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/united-kingdom-2020/>

## Media consumption

### National media

| Daily press titles*        | Circulation        | TV programmes**            | Audience  | Radio station                                      | Average weekday breakfast audience (000s) | Total reach***    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------|--|---|-------------------|
| Daily Mail                 | 998,047            | BBC1: News at Six          | 5,852,000 | BBC Radio 4  | 1,785.49                                  | 3.24%             |
| The Sun                    | 969,021            | BBC1: News at Ten          | 3,684,000 | BBC Radio 2  | 1,784.65                                  | 3.24%             |
| Metro                      | 781,293            | BBC1: The Andrew Marr Show | 2,239,000 | BBC Radio 1  | 752.51                                    | 1.37%             |
| London Evening Standard    | 489,830            | BBC1: Panorama             | 2,129,000 | BBC Radio 5 Live                                   | 327.17                                    | 0.59%             |
| Daily Mirror               | 381,146            | ITV: Evening News          | 2,115,000 | BBC Radio 3  | 132.82                                    | 0.24%             |
| The Times                  | 314,089            | BBC2: Horizon              | 971,000   | <b>% of all who use radio for breakfast news**</b> |   | <b>(% adults)</b> |
| The Daily Telegraph        | 262,539            | ITV: Peston on Sunday      | 726,000   | BBC Radio 2  |   | 4.1%              |
| Daily Express              | 249,568            | Channel 4: Dispatches      | 595,000   | BBC Radio 4  |   | 3.3%              |
| Daily Star                 | 229,752            | BBC1: Newsnight            | 485,000   | Capital  |   | 2.6%              |
| i                          | 148,927            | –                          | –         | BBC Radio 1  |   | 1.6%              |
| Financial Times            | 105,358            | –                          | –         | Heart FM   |   | 1.4%              |
| The Guardian               | 114,168            | –                          | –         | Smooth   |   | 0.9%              |
| <b>Sunday press titles</b> | <b>Circulation</b> |                            |           | LBC  |   | 0.7%              |
| Sun on Sunday              | 817,189            |                            |           | Gold   |   | 0.2%              |
| Sunday Times               | 614,697            |                            |           | Greatest Hits Network                              |   | 0.2%              |
| Sunday Mirror              | 314,314            |                            |           | –  |   | –                 |

\*Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), [www.newsworks.org.uk](http://www.newsworks.org.uk) Jan 2021

\*\*DEN average programme performance

\*\*\*[www.rajar.co.uk](http://www.rajar.co.uk) Q1 2020

**Digital: desktop and mobile**

| Total digital population of 50,710,157 | Total unique visitors/viewers (000) |                              |               | % reach     |                              |             |
|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------------------|-------------|
|  | Media                               | Total reach (digital UK pop) | Desktop       | Mobile      | Total reach (digital UK pop) | Desktop     |
| <b>Total internet: Total audience</b>  | <b>50,710</b>                       | <b>35,721</b>                | <b>42,728</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>100%</b>                  | <b>100%</b> |
| BBC.CO.UK                              | 33,269                              | 9,912                        | 26,872        | 66%         | 28%                          | 63%         |
| MSN.COM                                | 22,056                              | 19,698                       | 4,809         | 43%         | 55%                          | 11%         |
| BUZZFEED.COM                           | 6,184                               | 843                          | 5,543         | 12%         | 2%                           | 13%         |
| SKYSPORTS.COM                          | 5,401                               | 729                          | 4,840         | 11%         | 2%                           | 11%         |
| CNET.COM                               | 4,343                               | 1,415                        | 3,232         | 9%          | 4%                           | 8%          |
| Yahoo News                             | 4,070                               | 1,011                        | 3,278         | 8%          | 3%                           | 8%          |
| NEWSNOW.CO.UK                          | 2,196                               | 415                          | 1,873         | 4%          | 1%                           | 4%          |
| WP.PL                                  | 591                                 | 431                          | 232           | 1%          | 1%                           | 1%          |
| ONET.PL                                | 322                                 | 177                          | 178           | 1%          | 0%                           | 0%          |
| IBTIMES.CO.UK                          | 48                                  | 7                            | 41            | 0%          | 0%                           | 0%          |

Source: Comscore Feb 2021

## National multi-platform readership

| Monthly print, PC and mobile* | Monthly print and digital (000s) | Monthly desktop (000s) | Monthly mobile (smartphone/tablet) (000s) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Sun                           | 38,217                           | 3,573                  | 34,019                                    |
| Mail                          | 33,526                           | 4,906                  | 27,829                                    |
| Mirror                        | 32,049                           | 2,821                  | 29,114                                    |
| Express                       | 27,014                           | 3,739                  | 23,848                                    |
| Metro                         | 26,194                           | 1,567                  | 20,866                                    |
| The Guardian                  | 24,165                           | 5,058                  | 19,819                                    |
| The Telegraph                 | 19,697                           | 3,719                  | 15,671                                    |
| The Times                     | 16,606                           | 1,059                  | 13,958                                    |
| Evening Standard              | 15,239                           | 1,464                  | 12,242                                    |
| Daily Star                    | 10,453                           | 545                    | 9,193                                     |
| i                             | 7,669                            | 2,657                  | 6,200                                     |

Source: \*PAMCO 4 2020 (Nov '20 – Dec '20)

## Regional media

| North East              |              |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV       | Viewership   |
| Local TV Tyne & Wear    | 54,772       |
| That's Humber           | 29,842       |
| Local TV Teeside        | 20,138       |
| Regional/Local Radio    | Listenership |
| Smooth Radio North East | 503,000      |
| Capital North East      | 381,000      |
| Metro Radio             | 267,000      |
| Regional/Local Press    | Circulation  |
| Northern Echo           | 19,142       |
| Newcastle Chronicle     | 13,832       |
| Sunderland Echo         | 6,402        |

| East Midlands              |              |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV          | Viewership   |
| That's Norfolk             | 20,019       |
| That's Cambridge           | 9,501        |
| Regional/Local Radio       | Listenership |
| Smooth Radio East Midlands | 466,000      |
| Capital East Midlands      | 453,000      |
| Gem                        | 426,000      |
| Regional/Local Press       | Circulation  |
| Leicester Mercury          | 12,058       |
| Derby Telegraph            | 11,059       |
| Nottingham Post            | 8,434        |

| North West              |              |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV       | Viewership   |
| Local TV Liverpool      | 79,041       |
| That's Manchester       | 71,700       |
| That's Lancashire       | 37,239       |
| That's Cumbria          | 11,804       |
| Local TV Manchester     | 2,227        |
| Regional/Local Radio    | Listenership |
| Smooth Radio North West | 1,019,000    |
| Heart North West        | 552,000      |
| Capital North West      | 513,000      |
| Regional/Local Press    | Circulation  |
| Liverpool Echo          | 23,414       |
| Manchester Evening News | 16,785       |
| Bolton News             | 7,873        |

| South West           |              |
|----------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV    | Viewership   |
| That's Solent        | 35,388       |
| Local TV Bristol     | 28,881       |
| That's Hampshire     | 11,966       |
| That's Salisbury     | 2,023        |
| Regional/Local Radio | Listenership |
| Heart South West     | 323,000      |
| Pirate FM            | 162,000      |
| Smooth Radio Solent  | 73,000       |
| Regional/Local Press | Circulation  |
| Western Morning News | 10,397       |
| Western Daily Press  | 9,248        |
| Dorset Echo          | 8,352        |

| Yorkshire & Humber     |              |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV      | Viewership   |
| Local TV Leeds         | 73,115       |
| That's York            | 9,431        |
| Sheffield Live         | 8,193        |
| That's North Yorkshire | 4,000        |
| Regional/Local Radio   | Listenership |
| Capital Yorkshire      | 835,000      |
| Gem                    | 426,000      |
| Heart Yorkshire        | 414,000      |
| Regional/Local Press   | Circulation  |
| Yorkshire Evening Post | 16,108       |
| Yorkshire Post         | 15,064       |
| Hull Daily Mail        | 1,399        |

| South East            |              |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV     | Viewership   |
| KMTV                  | 18,046       |
| That's Thames Valley  | 16,437       |
| Latest TV             | 8,301        |
| That's Surrey         | 3,178        |
| Regional/Local Radio  | Listenership |
| Wave 105              | 326,000      |
| Heart Kent            | 292,000      |
| KMFM                  | 198,000      |
| Regional/Local Press  | Circulation  |
| Windsor Express       | 44,461       |
| Maidenhead Advertiser | 14,506       |
| Reading Chronicle     | 6,924        |

| West Midlands                  |              |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV              | Viewership   |
| Local TV Birmingham            | 76,801       |
| Notts TV                       | 28,019       |
| That's Oxfordshire             | 24,317       |
| Regional/Local Radio           | Listenership |
| Heart West Midlands            | 581,000      |
| Smooth Radio West Midlands     | 454,000      |
| Gem                            | 426,000      |
| Regional/Local Press           | Circulation  |
| West Midlands Express and Star | 20,025       |
| Birmingham Mail                | 10,011       |
| Coventry Telegraph             | 7,218        |

| London               |              |
|----------------------|--------------|
| Regional/Local TV    | Viewership   |
| London Live          | 71,000       |
| Regional/Local Radio | Listenership |
| Capital London       | 1,617,000    |
| Heart London         | 1,385,000    |
| Magic London         | 1,351,000    |
| Regional/Local Press | Circulation  |
| Evening Standard     | 514,049      |
| Metro London         | 342,883      |

\*Numbers based on Feb 2021 consumption

## Nations

| Scotland                |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| TV Station              | Daily Viewership   |
| That's Central Scotland | 100,109            |
| Regional Press          | Circulation        |
| Daily Record            | 106,479            |
| Herald                  | 22,901             |
| Scotsman                | 10,437             |
| Radio Stations          | Daily Listenership |
| Clyde 1                 | 585,000            |
| Capital Scotland        | 379,000            |
| Heart Scotland          | 340,000            |

| Northern Ireland  |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Regional Press    | Circulation        |
| Belfast Telegraph | 41,912             |
| Irish News        | 32,315             |
| Irish Newsletter  | 11,076             |
| Radio Stations    | Daily Listenership |
| Cool FM           | 527,000            |
| Q Radio           | 299,000            |
| Downtown Radio    | 278,000            |

| Wales                    |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| TV Station               | Daily Viewership   |
| Local TV Cardiff         | 21,648             |
| That's Swansea Bay       | 7,751              |
| Local TV North Wales     | 6,632              |
| Regional Press           | Circulation        |
| South Wales Evening Post | 10,923             |
| South Wales Argus        | 8,563              |
| Western Mail             | 8,419              |
| Radio Stations           | Daily Listenership |
| Smooth Radio North West  | 1,019,000          |
| Heart South Wales        | 368,000            |
| Kiss (West)              | 342,000            |

\*Numbers based on Feb 2021 consumption

## Media targeting ethnic minority groups

| Pan-South Asian media             |                   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Broadcast – TV and Radio Audience | Viewers/Listeners |
| Al Jazeera English TV             | 700,000           |
| BBC Asian Network                 | 543,000           |
| Sunrise National                  | 372,000           |
| Sunrise London                    | 192,000           |
| Sunrise Yorkshire                 | 50,000            |

| Turkish media  |             |
|----------------|-------------|
| Print title    | Circulation |
| Londra Gazette | 15,000      |
| Olay Gazette   | 6,000       |

| Muslim media    |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| Print title     | Circulation |
| The Muslim News | 18,000      |

| Chinese media      |             |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Print title        | Circulation |
| China Daily        | 300,000     |
| Nouvelles d'Europe | 35,000      |
| Sing Tao Daily UK  | 30,000      |
| The Epoch Times    | 10,000      |

| Punjabi media     |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Print title       | Circulation |
| Des Pardes Weekly | 33,000      |
| Punjab Times      | 23,000      |

| Indian media   |                |
|--|----------------|
| Print title  | Circulation    |
| Garavi Gujarat   | 43,000         |
| The Asian Express (Yorkshire, Midlands and Lancashire) | 42,000         |
| Asian Voice  | 33,000         |
| Eastern Eye  | 22,000         |
| Asian Lite   | 20,000         |
| Broadcast/digital                                      | Audience/reach |
| Zee TV   | 835,000        |
| NDTV   | 625,000        |

| African/Caribbean media           |                         |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Print title                       | Circulation             |
| The Voice                         | 30,000                  |
| The Trumpet                       | 20,000                  |
| Keep The Faith                    | 10,000                  |
| Broadcast – TV and radio audience | Listenership/Viewership |
| Capital Extra                     | 712,000                 |
| BEN TV                            | 150,000                 |
| Premier Radio                     | 121,000                 |
| Colourful Radio                   | 100,000                 |
| Spectrum Radio                    | 40,000                  |

| <b>Bangladeshi media</b> |             |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Print title              | Circulation |
| The Weekly Surma         | 20,000      |

| <b>Pakistani media</b> |             |
|------------------------|-------------|
| Print title            | Circulation |
| Nawa-i-jang            | 20,000      |

| <b>Jewish media</b>              |                 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Print title                      | Circulation     |
| Jerusalem Post                   | 50,000 (Israel) |
| The Jewish News                  | 25,000          |
| The Jewish Chronicle             | 20,000          |
| Jewish Telegraph<br>(3 Editions) | 14,000          |

| <b>Greek media</b> |             |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Print title        | Circulation |
| Parikiaki          | 4,500       |

| <b>Arabic media</b>    |             |
|------------------------|-------------|
| Print title            | Circulation |
| Arabisk Express        | 75,000      |
| Arabisk London         | 30,000      |
| Al Mahjer – Magazine   | 5,000       |
| Al Mahjer – Newsletter | 5,000       |

\*Numbers based on Feb 2021 consumption

## National media supplements

| Supplement title                                  | Annual readership |
|---|-------------------|
| Weekend (Daily Mail on Saturdays)                 | 2,639,000         |
| You (The Mail on Sunday)                          | 1,594,000         |
| The Sunday Times Magazine (The Sunday Times)      | 1,254,000         |
| Culture (The Sunday Times)                        | 1,192,000         |
| Fabulous (The Sun on Sunday)                      | 1,130,000         |
| Style (The Sunday Times)                          | 974,000           |
| Business (The Sunday Times)                       | 951,000           |
| Saturday Review (The Times on Saturdays)          | 907,000           |
| The Times Magazine (The Times on Saturdays)       | 864,000           |
| Telegraph Magazine (Daily Telegraph on Saturdays) | 750,000           |
| Weekend (The Guardian on Saturdays)               | 744,000           |
| Observer Food Monthly (The Observer)              | 638,000           |
| The Guide (The Guardian on Saturdays)             | 637,000           |
| ES Magazine (London Evening Standard)             | 614,000           |
| Your Money (Daily Telegraph on Saturdays)         | 576,000           |
| Notebook (Sunday Mirror)                          | 530,000           |
| Saturday (Daily Express on Saturdays)             | 454,000           |
| Stella (The Sunday Telegraph)                     | 454,000           |
| The Observer Magazine (The Observer)              | 451,000           |
| Business & Money (The Sunday Telegraph)           | 438,000           |
| 'S' Magazine (Sunday Express)                     | 362,000           |

Source: National Readership Survey (NRS) – PAMCo 4 Dec '20

# Why have a guide?

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GCS media teams are generally acknowledged as talented, capable, motivated and high-performing. However, it is essential to keep innovating and driving forward improvements within the profession. This guide sets out in one place the activities an efficient media relations team should be doing, in line with both MCOM and the individual behaviours outlined in the GCS Competency Framework.

The GCS Heads of News Network has collectively agreed the contents of this document, looking at the range of media

relations teams across government to identify these key functions.

The operational detail of how these functions are carried out will vary across different departments and Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), depending on departmental priorities, resources and personal judgement (from ministers, special advisers, Heads of News and Directors of Communication). However, this guidance sets out the key principles of structure and practice that are essential to demonstrate the baseline capability of the media relations function.



# Structure

There is no mandated one-size-fits-all structure. Each government organisation has team structures designed to meet their own needs. The key is to ensure that, whatever the organisation's chart may look like, there is an emphasis on the connection required to:

- enable effective media relations work
- ensure appropriate integration with other communications functions
- develop and nurture talent through effective and clear leadership
- position the function for strong relationship management with key stakeholders



# Propriety and conduct

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In carrying out these functions, across all aspects of their work, GCS members (central government departments, agencies and ALBs) must follow the Civil Service Code, which sets out the Civil Service values of:

- Integrity – putting the obligations of public service above personal interests
- Honesty – being truthful and open
- Objectivity – basing advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence
- Impartiality – serving governments of different political parties equally well

GCS members will also work at all times within the framework of propriety set for government communications, which mandates that government communication must:

- be relevant to government responsibilities
- be objective and explanatory
- be undertaken in an economic and appropriate way
- not be (or liable to be construed as) party political

The framework also mandates that GCS members may not:

- justify or defend policies in political terms
- advance any policy as belonging to a particular party
- directly attack the policies and opinions of opposition parties and groups
- oversell policies, reannounce achievements or investments, or otherwise mislead the public

Further reading and details are included in the [Propriety section of the GCS website](#).



# Core functional requirements – the five aspects

There are five core functional aspects that practitioners across a media relations team are required to operate with confidence and appropriate expertise.

Directors and Heads of Communication, in consultation with the Head of News, should ensure that their media relations teams have the required capability in these aspects so they can deliver effective day-to-day operations.

They should also plan and enable the necessary professional development of the team, and make sure that the team is equipped to cope resiliently when individuals leave and new colleagues join.

The tables across the following pages show the key specific requirements for best practice for each of the five aspects.

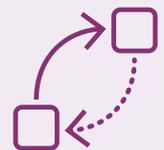
## 1. Proactive media handling

Making announcements | Nations and regions | Consumer media |  
Media targeting ethnic minorities | International



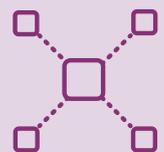
## 2. Reactive media handling

Media monitoring | Call handling/rebuttal | Crisis communications



## 3. Relationship management

Policy shaping and corporate | Integration with other comms | Ministerial and special adviser engagement | Winning and retaining journalists' trust



## 4. Digital/content creation

Digital | Content creation



## 5. Insight and evaluation

Insight | Evaluation





## 1. Proactive media handling

### (a) Making announcements

- i. Place stories in a strategic way to reach target audiences, aligned to departmental business objectives and ministerial priorities.
- ii. Ensure work aligns and integrates with strategic communications priorities and narratives and, where possible, campaign work.
- iii. Media announcements should support long-term government messages and drive behaviour change.
- iv. Use tools such as OASIS (Objectives, Audience insight, Strategy/idea, Implementation, Scoring/evaluation) to plan and properly target proactive work.
- v. Use a tactical approach to focus primarily on reaching intended audiences, being 'channel agnostic' and not relying solely on traditional print media.
- vi. Produce high-quality handling plans that include key products: press notices, potential risks, core scripts/briefing, technical journalist briefings and Q&A packs.
- vii. Consider the use of comment pieces, op-eds, blogs and shareable social media content.
- viii. Engage early with broadcast planning desks and correspondents to discuss how your announcement can work on TV or radio.
- ix. Work with broadcasters and stakeholders to identify filming opportunities, locations and backdrops that are authentic and illustrate your announcement.
- x. Speak regularly to key correspondents and build knowledge on their areas of expertise and interest.
- xi. Make sure agreed press notices and media products are adopted as core narratives to inform the work of other communications teams where appropriate.
- xii. Work with stakeholders through communications or policy colleagues to build third-party advocacy and support (in print, online, on broadcast) for announcements.
- xiii. Consider the use of trailing and embargoes to maximise impact and coverage and/or to deconflict with other expected news.

**(b) Nations and regions**

i. Find regional and devolved nations angles for UK-wide announcements, showing tangible impact or benefit.

ii. Tell local stories and adapt announcements to local regions (e.g. how many local jobs created for the area).

iii. Recognise the different political situations in each nation, and what powers are devolved. Ensure people know that a release is from the UK government.

iv. Set up media rounds for ministerial visits that include broadcast and key print for area visited.

v. Adapt stories for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, acknowledging the difference between national and regional media. Know when to use terms such as region, country and nation.

vi. Understand the BBC's General News Service regional service and its reach, and use it where it applies.

vii. Be aware that broadcast media is increasingly tailored to specific regional and national audiences, including bespoke news programmes for Scotland and other areas of the UK.

**(c) Consumer media**

i. Use non-news media, including broadcast, to showcase and explain government policies – e.g. long-lead TV, TV magazine programmes, documentary films.

ii. Work closely with campaign specialists to support priorities through consumer, specialist and trade channels.

iii. Plan long-term consumer campaigns that will stand up against the rigours of an ever-changing news agenda and central government priorities.

**(d) Ethnic minority audiences**

i. Identify ways to reach ethnic minority audiences for national policy announcements as a 'business as usual' approach.

ii. Provide explanation of all aspects of policy – lines to take and briefing for contentious and difficult issues.

iii. Maintain a database of key titles for communities across the UK and feed into centrally held lists of publications.

iv. Have regular discussions with ethnic minority media contacts and titles to build an understanding of how best to reach specific audiences through the right channels.

### **(e) International**

i. Engage with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and other international departments for advice on international announcements.

ii. Understand the international role of the UK government, specifically in security, prosperity and development, and how this relates to domestic policies (e.g. exports, jobs).

iii. Assess, advise and include in-country media when ministers travel overseas.

iv. Maintain an up-to-date database of key international media contacts.

v. Arrange ministerial and senior official briefings for international media.

vi. Engage UK-based international media and build relationships with key correspondents. Invite media to briefings and send them press notices.

vii. Use social media channels to reach overseas audiences with tailored messages.

## 2. Reactive media handling



### (a) Media monitoring

- i. Provide 24/7 real-time monitoring of relevant coverage, with news as a priority, but also including online, social and specialist channels as resources allow.
- ii. Evaluate news coverage to understand and pre-empt the direction of stories – evaluation should be turned into insight and learning over time and shared across teams.
- iii. Identify and flag important individual coverage including comments from stakeholders and parliamentarians.
- iv. Develop a real-time monitoring system that is focused and concise, ensuring that ministers, special advisers, senior officials and departments hear about relevant ‘breaking news’ swiftly, ideally from the in-house communications team first.
- v. Add professional expertise to coverage summaries by forecasting upcoming stories.
- vi. Monitor parliamentary business (Prime Minister’s Questions, Urgent Questions, Oral Questions, select committees and hearings).

### (b) Call handling/rebuttal

- i. Have a proactive approach to anticipating possible criticism and risk, and preparing in advance.
- ii. Work at pace to get relevant information to draft effective responses in the context of wider departmental and government priorities. Directly tackle the main issue with clear, concise language.
- iii. Deal with journalists confidently and helpfully. Judge how stories will be presented and their prominence (is it a front page story or a page lead? Is it a bulletin item or leading the news?).
- iv. Engage with journalists verbally and have the confidence and ability to effectively brief to shape and contextualise stories, and prevent or correct inaccurate coverage.
- v. Use digital and other channels for rapid rebuttal where needed (media blog, social media, ministerial social media statements, etc.).

vi. Give ministers and special advisers the confidence that the department is rebutting negative media through regular updates, including out of hours.

vii. Evaluate rebuttal and response effectiveness, by tracking stories that do not appear as a result of rebuttals (spiked) as well as sentiment or prominence of response in coverage.

**(c) Crisis communications**

i. Establish the facts as quickly as possible and identify contact points for key areas (policy/operational lead, ministerial liaison, communications lead, etc.).

ii. Initiate immediate and close media monitoring, including social media and digital online.

iii. Produce initial 'holding statements' and key Q&As to clarify facts.

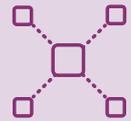
v. Consider the rebuttal of inaccurate commentary and proactively issuing agreed statements.

vi. Produce handling and contingency plans for potential crises, covering likely scenarios, responses, possible triggers for media bids, stakeholder engagement and cross-government conference calls when appropriate.

vii. Prepare content, when possible and appropriate, before crises, in line with risk and likelihood.

viii. Work with other communications colleagues to address potential longer-term and reputation-recovery campaigns, in particular the Cabinet Office's Rapid Response Unit, to help combat the spread of disinformation.

### 3. Relationship management



#### (a) Policy shaping and corporate

i. Develop productive working relationships with policy and service delivery teams to understand their priorities, structures, policies and desired outcomes, and build these into communication objectives.

ii. Get involved in policy and service development from an early stage – not just in the few days before an announcement – to ensure communications objectives align with policy objectives.

iii. Build the authority to engage with internal and external stakeholders on how media might react to a policy announcement or proposal and how to best communicate policy.

iv. Use knowledge of ministerial priorities to aid policy development.

v. Observe the principles laid down for best practice in co-operation between No.10 and departments, share responses with No.10 promptly before lobby, make sure regular and routine meetings with No.10 colleagues take place.

vi. Act as an advocate for the department in dealings with ministers, explaining the overall communication goals and advising on a course of action.

#### (b) Integration with other communications

i. Work in partnership with communications colleagues from all disciplines to ensure consistent, creative, strategic external communications across channels and audiences.

ii. Work across teams to identify which channel might be the most effective in reaching the target audience (e.g. stakeholder or digital) and plan handling accordingly.

iii. Media activity should support long-term campaigns not just short-term emerging issues.

#### (c) Ministerial and special adviser engagement

i. Build strong relationships with private offices to build trust and ensure access to decision makers.

ii. Maintain productive relationships with ministers through regular engagement and informed advice.

iii. Identify ministerial priorities and use them to shape media output and policy development.

iv. Build productive working relationships with special advisers, including acting as advocates for the department.

v. Understand ministerial requirements and provide regular media briefings to ministers and special advisers.

vi. Accompany ministers to media interviews and regional visits.

vii. Provide media training and coaching to ministers and senior officials to improve the presentation of policy.

**(d) Winning and retaining journalists' trust**

i. Build professional relationships with journalists based on honesty, authority and credibility.

ii. Identify the most influential journalists on particular topics and maintain ongoing relationships.

iii. Stay up to date on media trends and understand the approach and style of different journalists.

iv. Adhere at all times to the Civil Service Code.

## 4. Digital and visual



### (a) Digital

i. Be digital by default, using the advice provided by the GCS and Government Digital Service to use online tools to reach specific audiences, engage with people and assess the impact of your work.

ii. Embed digital channels in all media handling and use digital and social media channels for both proactive announcements and reactive media handling.

iii. Work with internal or external digital communications specialists to consider digital from the outset of campaign planning.

iv. Use online communication tools to maximise all campaign, event and media work

v. Work with digital teams to tailor messaging and approach for social media, adapting content to different audiences.

vi. Work with digital teams to focus on image, graphic or video-led content for maximum engagement.

vii. Have a set process for digital use in crisis communications that is practised and understood.

viii. Use digital channels for rebuttal and immediate reaction.

ix. Manage or advise on social media accounts for ministers.

x. Actively monitor social and online media for emerging issues and proactive opportunities.

xi. Identify and work with key influencers on social media to amplify messaging.

xii. Collaborate across other government departments to amplify digital messaging.

xiii. Share lessons learned and best practice with colleagues across GCS.

**(b) Content creation**

i. Build a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement to ensure content remains engaging and fresh.

ii. Encourage access to all communicators so they can produce or effectively commission products such as video and images for social media e.g. infographics.

iii. Produce high-quality content in-house for use by media outlets, or commission Design102 or external agencies to deliver this content.

iv. Repurpose content for different digital channels and audiences to ensure it is as effective as possible, based on detailed research.

v. Have the capability in place to ensure content can be produced quickly during a fast-moving news event.

vi. Plan and produce (or commission) relevant, engaging and shareable content appropriate to channels and government messaging.

vii. Provide practical services including filming, editing and producing new content, or brief Design102 or external agencies to deliver this work.

viii. Provide staff with content production software and hardware when appropriate and cost-effective.

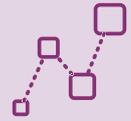
ix. Follow GCS guidance on accessibility.

x. Monitor emerging trends to research and utilise new channels.

xi. Build strong relationships with digital and picture desks in news organisations.

xii. Understand data protection, consent, copyright and intellectual property law around featuring case studies and use of third-party content.

## 5. Insight and evaluation



### (a) Insight

- i. Use insight to identify and secure different audiences, and inform media handling proposals.
- ii. Better target your work by considering how audience characteristics such as age, gender, social class and education level inform media consumption habits.
- iii. Use departmental or cross-government polling and insight tools to inform handling approaches and measure effectiveness of announcements and campaigns over the longer term.
- iv. Use audience measurement tools such as National Readership Survey (NRS), the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) and Comscore across print, broadcast and digital, and at national and regional levels.

### (b) Evaluation

- i. Identify clear and SMART communications objectives around outputs, outtakes and outcomes, including deciding 'success' measurements and how data will be collected.
- ii. Use a dashboard (or similar tool) to monitor and record activity as it is delivered in line with the GCS Evaluation Framework.
- iii. Identify 'lessons learned' from each media project and share learning with the rest of the team, with the wider directorate and across the department.
- iv. Produce an evaluation pack that highlights reach/coverage, assesses content (positive, negative, neutral) and identifies message penetration, as well as business impact delivered through comms.
- v. Find innovative ways to evaluate rebuttal, briefing and story shaping, including by tracking sentiment or prominence of responses in coverage or coverage that does not appear as a result of briefing/rebuttal.

vi. Track sentiment over longer periods to identify shifts in the tone of coverage and provide early warning of emerging issues and trends. In particular, draw on departmental or cross-government polling and insight gathering to measure long-term effectiveness and audience sentiment.

vii. Identify media outlets that don't carry ministerial lines or run stories without checking properly and work with them to improve relationships.

viii. Integrate different media – print, digital, broadcast – into evaluation to provide a comprehensive picture.

# Case studies

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You can find a wide range of case studies on the [GCS website](#). These resonate with the specific requirements of the five core aspects as outlined above.

As well as providing a useful resource for media teams across GCS, these case studies should inform exchanges and secondments between departments to ensure best practice is recognised and shared. Teams should always be proactive in sharing best practice and contacting teams in other departments to seek advice and support.

# Building capability

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To develop full capability in all the aspects described, a media relations practitioner will require:

- significant experience
- exposure to the relevant work opportunities
- support to build their capability through training, coaching and self-managed learning

The [GCS Career Framework](#) sets out the competencies required at different levels (AIO/IO, SIO, G7/G6). The content on press and media work, considered alongside this guide, is helpful in terms of setting out requirements for specific grades and planning exposure to further work opportunities.



# Professional development

There are many different ways to build capability. You should review the [GCS Curriculum and standards guide](#) to understand the range of professional development activity you are expected to undertake in the coming performance year. You can access learning directly through the GCS Curriculum, such as:

- Online Crisis Response and Media Relations
- Writing Professionally
- Creative Content
- Influencing Skills
- Behaviour Change
- Working with the Modern Media

A powerful learning option is the opportunity to learn from peers through coaching or organised attachments or work shadowing media teams in other departments and ALBs. As part of endorsing this document, Heads of News across departments and ALBs have agreed to take a proactive approach to opening up their teams to work shadowing and secondment opportunities. They will consider requests as a standing agenda item at their regular meetings. This group will commission further reference materials including templates and core media lists.

Heads of News and deputies are also required to train others as part of building capability across the wider GCS which will schedule the training, publicise the events and provide materials in advance. GCS will also support a ‘train the trainer’ session on the media modules for media officers and communicators who would like a refresher in presentations and training, plus consistency in how the training modules should be delivered.

Personal research is of course a vitally important element of building capability. Media relations teams should be expected to keep up to date with industry developments through key trade media such as Press Gazette, MediaGuardian and PR Week.

Learning and development leads inside departments should encourage informal learning opportunities, such as inviting senior journalists or content producers to speak.

# Conclusion by Jamie Davies

## Prime Minister's Deputy Official Spokesperson and No.10 Head of News

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

**Jamie Davies**  
Prime Minister's Deputy Official Spokesperson  
and No.10 Head of News

No two days are ever the same working in No10. But one thing I can always count on is the great support of press officers from right across government. Every day, media teams are working to support ministers and departments, often at extremely short notice on some of the toughest issues of the day. Media teams are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year but I'm always amazed and very grateful at the quality of advice and information that teams are able to provide, no matter what the the hour is.

Government ministers understand the media and its nuances and rightly value the skills that media teams bring, but part of our role too is to help them constantly evolve their thinking around the media. How to use the media to drive behaviour change – to inform people or businesses to take action to do something – is really what we have to try and do day to day. Our audiences have never been more diverse, which means the day to day nature of our jobs must also follow suit.

We've made huge strides as a profession – none more so than the past year where daily government press conferences helped pass on Covid safety messaging directly to a public hungry for reliable news. You have to love pace, immediacy and constant change to thrive in this job, and as the media itself innovates, so too must we.

I have had the pleasure of working in multiple government departments over the years and I have been lucky to work with some of the best communicators you could hope to meet. One thing they all had in common was that they were all highly experienced in their respective fields and had spent years honing their skills and building their expertise. They all took their own development seriously and it is incumbent on us all to do the same; this guide has been written to support you in that effort. The learning and development offer that is now available is as good as it has ever been, but it is only useful if people take advantage of it.

I strongly believe that innovative spirit is ingrained in all media officers which is why this Media Guide is such an important tool in drawing out the best practices across the government. I hope that everyone who reads this can use it to critically assess their own performance and use it as a tool to develop.

This guide was updated in May 2021 by Adam Shortman (BEIS) on behalf of the Head of News Network, with particular assistance from Josh (GCHQ).

### Contact us

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**Design that makes a difference**

