Communicating in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis – tips for professional communicators
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Foreword

This guide is for everyone across the UK public sector and anyone working in communications dealing with the current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the UK.

The contributors have worked as strategic communication leads, press office managers and press officers during crises; from foot and mouth outbreaks and floods to the collapse of Northern Rock and the London 7/7 terrorist attacks. We’ve also worked as directors of communication in the NHS and local government, and as trainers and consultants to organisations that need to plan how they will communicate when things go wrong.

We’ve made many mistakes along the way and learned a lot about how to reach audiences in the very worst of times.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) presents a challenge, which is truly unique and while communications principles do not change, they do need to be adapted. We’ve pooled our collective thoughts and tips in the hope that they can be of some help to those working in communications during the current crisis. Some of this information may be familiar to you but there might be areas where you’re having to get up to speed very quickly in challenging circumstances.

We have written this guide for communication professionals of all grades, in all UK nations and regions, and all public sector organisations. We’re not intending to provide definitive ‘rules’ but instead to offer our collective knowledge and ideas, in the hope they will be of use.

We understand that the challenges you are facing are immense; both working on the crisis directly and in the many unintended (and unpredictable) consequences of it. We also understand that the easing of restrictions is likely to be a prolonged process and will present further communications challenges.

Some people are also adapting to working remotely for the first time, and others are coping with illness and bereavement in workplaces, families and communities. We have nothing but admiration for the amazing work you’re doing under the most difficult of circumstances and wish you the very best of luck.

Do get in touch if we can support you in any other ways. Please contact emma@allegoryagency.co.uk with any questions or feedback on this publication.

Thank you to Emma Thwaites for editing this guide and to all the other contributors who have kindly given their expertise to support communications practitioners during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
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Crafting effective messages and calls to action

In a crisis, it’s vital your messages not only reach their intended audience but are instantly understood so that they can be acted upon. When messages land badly, it’s usually because they are written for the organisation (what we want to say) rather than for the audience (what they need to hear).

During a crisis, your audience will be under stress and that can reduce their ability to retain information. So simple, clear messaging is key, used repeatedly and across all appropriate channels. Having worked on several real crises and numerous crisis exercises, here’s what we’ve learned about crafting effective messages when it really matters:

**Make them clear:** The message you put out and the message that’s received need to be as close to each other as they can be, and that means being really sure about the point that you want to get across. Try to leave as little room for misinterpretation as possible. Use the shortest and simplest words you can and sense-check your message with others (even friends and family) if possible. You will have knowledge and expertise that the audience does not.

If you’re briefing an expert for an interview, it’s important that your briefing is clear, free of jargon and complex language (and that you underline this important point with them before the interview). Aim to field media-trained experts, rather than managers with no media experience for interviews.

**Be consistent:** Messages are going to flow all the way from the UK Government daily briefings, through departments and they need reinforcing at a local level. Any hint of disagreement or caveats will be seized upon by the media, desperate for new angles, and other groups and individuals who have particular agendas to pursue. It’s essential to make sure that you know what’s being said centrally and the guidance coming from the UK Government on an almost daily basis, and have that in mind when you’re drafting material and briefing in your local context.

**Keep them solid:** How often do we hear empty phrases such as ‘we’re doing everything we can’ or ‘our top priority is keeping people safe’ but what does this actually look like in practice? Don’t assume the audience will fill in those gaps with correct (or positive) information; tell them what you’re doing using concrete examples. If someone hearing your message could think ‘well they would say that wouldn’t they?’ it needs to be backed up with evidence.

Messages that mean a lot to you won’t necessarily resonate with your audience, so always construct them with the viewer/listener in mind. Remember to back up your messages to add credibility. For example, telling the audience that “the rescue operation is very challenging” could sound like an excuse, but if you tell them why it’s challenging – “this is a remote part of the country, many of the roads are just single tracks, and simply getting the equipment to the location is enormously difficult” – it is much more credible.

**Use evidence:** Talking of which – keep it straightforward when you’re dealing with statistics and research. More than one or two key numbers in each interview/statement/video and the audience will forget which is which. Complex ideas such as those around rates of infection can be baffling and misleading unless you have a research background, and that will make answering follow-up questions (for example, around methodologies) challenging and risky. It’s better to stick consistently to one or two numbers – and it’s worthwhile getting officials to rehearse out loud how they’re going to explain them clearly.

**Be focused:** Restrict the number of messages you try to put across in each communication. The general rule is three key messages per interview/statement but in a crisis, you may be even better served by restricting it to one or two in each major communication. For example, the daily No10 briefings focus on one key area each day, to ensure clarity and understanding. It’s better that the audience remembers one strong message than vaguely pick up a half-sense of three.
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Be memorable: Using real-life examples and human stories to make your messages feel real and relevant, will make them much more powerful. If officials can put themselves in the story - ‘on the ward this morning’ or ‘when I talked to the delivery drivers yesterday’ - their words will have greater credibility.

Command attention: Your messages need to cut through mountains of information and they won’t do that by being bland. Do encourage your officials to avoid public-sector or management jargon, particularly those who may not be media trained or used to being the focus of communication. Try to avoid well-worn language and clichés. Try to think of fresh ways of expressing ideas and don’t be afraid to be human and relatable. If you feel sympathy, say it; if you are impressed by the actions of another, praise them.

Stay positive (and we know that it’s not easy at times): Are people ‘safely in their homes’ or ‘trapped in their houses’? Messages have a better motivating effect if they are largely positive, which also then allows for appropriate contrast when you need a stark message to cut through. So a ‘we don’t know’ can be expressed as ‘what we’re doing to find out’, and a ‘we haven’t yet managed’ can be a ‘what we’re doing to get to that point’. If you can make your messages active – talk about what you’re doing – they will be more believable.

Don’t betray confidences: Confidentiality in a crisis can be difficult to maintain, but as the official voice of an organisation, it’s vital you do not relay confidential information about a member of staff, member of the public, or in NHS organisations, anything related to a patient. But that does not mean you have to be bureaucratic; be empathetic and show your sincerity.

Using messages

With the pace of news and developments in the present crisis, managing messages is critical to exercising what limited control is possible.

National/Supra-National Messages

You will be called upon to comment on messages coming from the UK Government, international organisations, political organisations at home and abroad, MPs and other political representatives. It is entirely right and reasonable that you should respond according to the patterns of community, culture and industry in your region but not that you should challenge or countermand those messages.

Remember:
• Cascade, confirm, clarify, but never contradict.
• Tailor the messaging to suit your audience but resist the temptation to re-invent.

Local/Regional Messages

Similarly, local messages issued by your organisation, or in response to particular local circumstances will be required frequently. Whilst these will be site/service-specific they must still be coherent and consistent with the basic national message(s).
Gatekeeping for Messages

To maintain consistency, round-the-clock monitoring of relevant news and public sector sources is essential but this comes at a potential cost of front-line responders not doing routine tasks, particularly if your organisation or service doesn’t subscribe to media monitoring services.

If possible, seek volunteers from other parts of your workforce that can, if required and deemed appropriate: support with briefing, act as first responders on your phones and news feeds, field and redirect incoming calls, follow social media threads and stock up on case studies and positive stories. They might also provide support to those identifying emerging issues that might require a coordinated response.

Staff and (if you have them) elected members have a role to play in social listening and helping local communicators to get feedback on how messages are landing. If you don’t have automated social listening tools, it can be frustrating trying to monitor the sheer volume of chatter, but colleagues and networks can be your eyes and ears on the ground.

The many established and new community groups and locally-based support teams are busy on social media all day, everyday and they could provide early warning of problems and act as conduits to cascade messages, if and when prompt action is needed or advice changes.

We understand that there will be enormous variations across nations and regions. Each local comms team has different pressures on time and resources which will lead to variations in their capacity to establish and maintain links with groups and sub-groups (including mutual aid groups) that have sprung up since the crisis began.

Calls-to-action

When advice changes or when restrictions are reviewed, those community groups will, with your regional and local media (if you have local media), be the primary audience for any ‘call-to-action’ aimed at the general public. Again, there will be some licence to tweak the core message to match local needs but issue nothing that conflicts with, or dilutes, the national message.

Where possible use a front-line member of staff to issue your call to action: a fire officer, a doctor, social worker or refuse collector will have more power than someone in a business suit!

Calls-to-action heading the other way, (aimed at local authorities or other public sector bodies), may come from the public sector PR community. For example, requests for more or different services and additional information and guidance. They should be responded to in a positive and timely manner, consistent with the delivery of the necessary public advice and reassurance.

Using Your Network

Challenges to the current HMG position, or calls for changes to policies and regulations are valid at a time of crisis but need to be very carefully curated. Civil and public servants should not criticise or comment on Government policy. Elected members however (if your organisation has them), are not bound by the same rules and have a freedom to speak. We have seen examples of this in the current crisis and there will undoubtedly be more. Similarly, trade unions, industry associations, activist groups and others have opportunities for comment that are not open to official spokespeople.

To use these networks to generate debate or raise local issues is something that if done, has to be managed with great care and with due political impartiality and nothing that is unethical should be contemplated. Used sparingly, and with great caution, these extra-curricular parties can instigate or support issues that your LA would like to see in the public domain. We have seen this extensively in the current crisis with representatives of care home bodies, or health staff unions advancing causes and calls-to-action. We do not suggest that they have been ‘primed’ to do so but clearly they are able to bring important issues into the public domain.
Networking

To coin a phrase, ‘we are all in this together’ and we can learn from and support colleagues in other public sector bodies that are struggling to maintain a responsive, authoritative media team. Even in these pressurised environments (perhaps, especially in such times), networking to share best practice, combine resources and ensure necessary coherence and consistency across the wider sector is a valuable and responsible use of our time. And let’s look out for each other, as well. We know that many in-house teams have shrunk and will be under immense pressure; check in, ask for help and do not suffer in silence.

Tackling fake news and misinformation

‘Fake news’ has been defined by Wired’s Zeynep Tufekci as a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media. It spreads on social media platforms (which can be monitored) but also through WhatsApp groups and SMS text messaging, both of which are private and are more difficult to track. So the response is an area where a centralised approach will not provide the whole answer. Instead we need to release advice and materials into ‘the wild’ and use the same vectors that the trolls use. We should aim to inform audiences so they can be aware of the warning signs of a fake or misleading message, and give them the confidence to challenge the sender (and not be bullied into sending it onwards, which people often do in a spirit of helpfulness). The UK Government has produced the SHARE checklist for identifying fake news and misinformation.

Simple infographics that can be shared to spread accurate and factual information and counteract fake or misleading ‘facts’ can be helpful. They can also be made available to audiences, ready to be sent instead of sending on the fake message, hijacking that spirit of helpfulness back into something that genuinely does help, rather than spreading fear. Please ensure any infographics or other assets you produce carry your branding, so as to be credible and trusted. The assets readily available in all the Public Health bodies for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are branded with the appropriate NHS/UK Government branding, which you can use.

Although it’s difficult to monitor every message in these extraordinary circumstances, we should still endeavour to examine their content, as they can give us insights into who the audience respects as an authority figure. Many are tagged as just “this message comes from a friend of my sister’s who is a virologist” or some such vague construction, but others cite “the head of nursing at (specific local hospital name)”. This second type of message shows us who the audience regards as having genuine authority, not because the original troll has a great insight, but because that message has survived and has been passed from person to person (often repeatedly). We should engage with the figures named in these fake news messages, not just to rebut the current instance of the fake message itself but on an ongoing basis as the audience clearly wants to listen to them and sees them as highly credible.

Staff, resources and collaboration

NB: A number of professional organisations, recruitment agencies and individual collectives have set up services whereby people can volunteer their time and skills to organisations dealing with Coronavirus (COVID-19) that are time and cash poor. Check CIPR, localpublicservicecomms.org, and PRCA websites for more information on these.

In some areas there are mutual aid programmes where staff cross organisational boundaries in order to support each other. This might be across different parts of the health service (ICS, commissioning and providers) covering each others’ calls, particularly out of hours, as well as sharing the latest information. This sometimes covers social care providers too.

The NHS has always operated a mutual aid programme and right now, we are seeing colleagues from the non-acute sector (Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Sustainability Transformation Plans (STPs) sharing staff and resources with hospital communications teams in response to COVID-19. If you are unsure how to approach mutual aid, here are some ideas:

1. Think about what the support would look like: boots on the ground, virtual advice and support or completely outsourcing some activity;

2. Find the things that are easiest to share, not the complex work and not that which will require special access to systems and processes (unless you can give access and training easily);

3. Try to think of the support in three phases. Firstly, in the eye of the storm (if you have to send some of your team out to a location, or as is the case during COVID-19, you are in a pattern of seven day working); secondly, as the issue continues, think here about week three, four, month two; thirdly, when it is over (and it will be), your team will have accrued holiday, possibly time off in lieu etc;

4. Finally think about recovery. Your team may well benefit from professional support, through counselling; but also from peer to peer support, a friendly fellow communicator who ‘gets it’;

5. Ideally, you’ll do all of this in ‘peacetime’, but we do not live in an ideal world!

This crisis is a good time to reach out to others, gather around common information and create habits which will need to be used in future. This could be something as simple as a half hour call or video conference, or saving useful documents in a shared folder with each others’ out of hours contacts, lines to take and useful facts and figures.

Whilst we are in unusual and challenging circumstances, it is important to continue to maintain good records. For example, by building an ongoing repository of content and assets, research and records. Contacts should be kept up-to-date in the business continuity plan and also in the physical emergency planning book, just in case of IT outages or cyber attack.

Finding extra help

Non-communications staff can be a lifeline in fielding and triaging press office enquiries, if they are available to help. They can handle calls which are factual in nature, help to ensure callers are redirected if they’re not for the press office, and make sure journalists are connected to the right person.

It might be possible to look around your organisation and see if there are other staff who could be redeployed in this role\(^2\). They don’t need to be PR professionals, although a level of experience of public interaction would be useful, so people who work in service centres or in public-facing roles (in libraries or galleries for example) might be able to help. In extremes, you can recruit volunteers, but these people will need vetting to make sure they can do the job well enough. PA/EAs are also excellent in this role, as they are organised, used to taking on board complex information and have often had their fair share of challenging calls and questions to field.

\(^2\) Remember that if people are on official furlough they cannot work and should not be contacted via their work emails.
Once in place, give people a core script and permission to answer the most basic enquiries. More difficult enquiries should always be escalated to the core professional team. There are examples of a system like this working in the past. Here are two examples from Resilience, the magazine of the Emergency Planning Society:

**Case study 1:** In 2005, two days after the 7/7 bombings in London, Birmingham city centre was evacuated when it faced a ‘credible threat’ as three suspects were sighted acting suspiciously. It was a huge media story. West Midlands Police only had a small press team. They had trained their front desk reception team to take all initial media calls, working from a central script, and filtering out those enquiries that didn’t need a more detailed answer from the professional media team.

**Case study 2:** In January 2002, an executive jet crashed at Birmingham Airport, killing five people. The airport had only two press officers available, but fortunately had a well-rehearsed plan, using its public information staff to assist the press office in an emergency. Their ‘day job’ was to staff the information points dotted around the airport to assist travellers. Armed with a central script, provided by the press office, the public information team staffed the phones to deal with initial enquiries from the media. Any difficult queries were passed onto the experienced press officers. This filtered out the bulk of routine questions from the media, giving the PR specialists a breathing space to manage the communications strategy and plan the next steps.

You can also make the phone your friend by automating your triage, and introducing a telephone tree on your answering service so that only Covid-19-related media calls get through. There are lots of different phone services so it’s best to talk to whoever in your organisation manages them to get this set up. The IT and Governance teams will most likely have a view.

Another way to limit the volume of calls is to keep your website up to date with lines to take. Many journalists calling to get the latest news will be more than happy to take a line off the website if it’s relevant and timely. Each reporter who does that and doesn’t call you is one call less for you to deal with, giving you more time to be strategic. Consider adding value to the web-based resources by also including ready-to-use images and videos as well as plain text.

It can be an idea to set a definite time of day when you will update your messages, say by 11am each morning, which will allow time to have an early morning update internally, agree lines to take and get them ready. Even if there is no update, say that. By setting a definite time of day and sticking to it, journalists will look to your social media feeds, or website before calling you.

**Communicating across your organisation**

Keeping really good, up-to-date records will now be your best friend. Making sure that everyone has access to the latest information will be essential to avoid confusion and ensure consistency. If people have to dig around a messy repository of materials to find what they need it will add to their stress. If you’re someone who is naturally organised, or your team or organisation has good filing systems and processes, this will feel like a very obvious point. But we’ve all worked in organisations where this wasn’t the case (we may even have been guilty of presiding over unruly electronic filing systems ourselves!).
With so many people working remotely, or attending the office less frequently and in different working patterns, having a well-labelled, well-signposted electronic system will now make a huge difference.

**In this you might find:**

- A list of people with the roles they are fulfilling and contact details (make sure that people are informed in advance and are content for their information to be included and keep a record of their consent). Also, be aware of any annual leave which may impact the communications team - including spokespeople/experts - and have back up personnel in place if necessary) and make contingency arrangements for if people have to suddenly go off sick and have to isolate.

- A central briefing document with constantly updated lines to take, Q&A information and records of responses given to journalist questions, ensuring key staff all have access to it. This document will also help to inform briefing for the chief executive and other senior leaders.

- Details of website and social media updates, and comments and feedback monitored and responded to.

- The core principles of what can be said and what cannot, e.g. ‘we never give ages of children in our care’; ‘these are the only answers we can give for condition checks they are critical, critical but stable, stable’ etc.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation and priorities will change over time, from a period of strict stay at home and focus on health, to one of recovery/relaxation of some or all restrictions and addressing economic impacts and effects on local services and businesses. So a regular review of messaging and strategy will be necessary, and also an assessment of how well the organisation is coping with each phase.

A post-crisis grading template, to be filled in by staff and discussed, would ensure that learnings are incorporated and next steps are planned and implemented. It is important that ‘lessons learned’ are captured as close to ‘real time’ as possible. All the actions taken by public servants could be scrutinised following the crisis so it’s good to get into the habit of capturing them promptly, perhaps after each piece of key communication.

**The kinds of questions to consider might include:**

- **Prompt:** Did we respond quickly?
- **Informative:** Did we address the basic information needs for internal and/or external audiences?
- **Sincere:** Did we respond with humanity and care, showing empathy for people impacted?
- **Honest:** When known, did we clearly explain the situation
- **Humble:** If applicable, did we admit to any mistakes?
Communicating with digitally excluded groups

NB: Where people have no access to the internet, communicating with them can be especially challenging. We understand that there are limitations to what can be achieved, in terms of reaching audiences offline. The following notes are drafted with the understanding that running campaigns for multiple audiences across a myriad of offline channels may not be practical at this time. Remember that schools, faith groups, charities, community nursing teams and social care will have most access to those with multiple disadvantages: they are excellent at understanding what is going on on the ground as well as getting messages out.

At a time of crisis local authority and other public sector communications teams will be under pressure for time and resources, and comprehensive outreach to all sections of the community, including the digitally excluded, may not be possible. In many areas, it’s likely that the digitally excluded also belong to high risk groups such as older people and the clinically vulnerable.

Using local networks carefully and harnessing existing community groups and channels is useful where practical and possible. Local and community radio stations and hyper local news outlets (including local newspapers and free sheets, if they continue in print) are often more trusted, although again not accessible to all.

Volunteer groups may of course be a source of help. Councils that have the capacity to coordinate local volunteers and voluntary sector organisations can disseminate information through these channels. Networks set up locally to assist with essential tasks such as food deliveries or neighbourhood faith groups, food banks, charities and Neighbourhood Watch groups will be in touch with their clients and members, so providing guidance and materials on how to communicate via text groups, leaflets or word of mouth could help. Traditional methods of communications such as leaflet distribution or direct mail but local public sector colleagues will want to think about the GDPR considerations and bear in mind current guidelines around physical distancing and staying at home. Local public sector teams that can offer practical guidance and support might ease the pressure on their own teams as well as their wider local network. We’re sure there are many examples of good communication of this kind. Surrey County Council produces a briefing for just such a purpose and they have given us permission to reproduce it here.

A different approach to planning

Firstly, you’re likely to need to adjust your approach to risk in a crisis. In most cases, you probably ask yourself ‘what’s the risk of doing this’: a TV interview, a statement, a tweet etc. But you also need to think about the risk of not doing it, because if you’re not communicating, you’re leaving it up to others to interpret the situation and you will always then be commenting on their version of events. In this current, fast moving situation, not everything you produce will be perfect, but that’s better than producing nothing and leaving a communications vacuum to be filled with speculation and fear-mongering.

It’s also worth thinking about the communication planning tools that can be used to keep you one step ahead. Maybe you can introduce a seven-day rolling plan of all your Warning & Informing campaigns and coordinate it with a forward planning media grid. Where you can, help to drive the media agenda, rather than it driving you.

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3 Public Health England, Public Health Wales, Public Health Scotland and the Northern Ireland Public Health Agency has a lot of downloadable content resources available for NHS staff, LAs and other public sector organisations and groups. This includes versions for all groups including Braille and BSL materials, all the national public health bodies have information, and resources available for communicators, and they are gathered together here in the LPS Coronavirus Resource for Communicators.
You can do this, if you have the resource, by making one member of the team the ‘owner’ of a forward looking plan (with a deputy or ‘buddy’ to cover the role, in the event that the plan ‘owner’ becomes unwell). This person can work to develop a series of positive proactive stories about your key workers. For example, can your bin crews film themselves out and about to demonstrate that they’re still working for the community, that the usual pick-up times may change because the roads are quieter? Could local health care workers create a ‘video diary’ as they jump in their cars and head off on their rounds? Link social media posts to information about how the public can support these services. Wolverhampton Council has produced a great example of front-line workers showing how they are supporting local people, and issuing calls to action. It is one of many.

Your proactive resource will benefit from a strong link to internal communications, as a way of making sure that the positive news stories on the front line reach the communications team. There are many examples of acts of kindness on social media at the moment and your front line staff may well have been on the receiving end of them. Maybe consider creating a hashtag # to help promote these stories. The CIPR LPS group has been promoting some of these stories on its social channels using the hashtag #PublicSectorProud

Content

Generating content that reaches audiences in different ways, and keeps them engaged with important information, is tricky at the best of times; even more so at the moment, when we need to adjust our methods and habits to comply with official guidance.

Smartphone filming in a crisis

Audiences find evidence of the practical work being done by front line responders more credible than abstract policy announcements and it’s also much safer ground in terms of message control: audiences will argue with the political direction, but it’s harder to argue with what diligent front-line workers are doing to tackle the problem. So, if you’re doing something real and practical, film it (but film it safely).

The best camera is the one you have with you. Most people have a smartphone and with a few simple adaptations, you can get really good results out of your existing kit. We’ve gathered together a few tips on how to do this in pictures, sound and content.

Good smartphone pictures

If you’re filming for social media, then you’re fine to film vertically (that’s how people look at it on their timeline), but if you have any aspiration that it will be picked up by local TV and re-used, please hold your phone horizontally to fit the shape of widescreen TVs at home.

Your camera is not a firehose, so don’t wave it around trying to capture everything at once. Find an interesting shot, frame it up, film and count to ten in your head. Film for longer than you think, because when it comes to an edit, you’ll always regret short shots and you can only extend them by using slowmo, which lacks realism.

You could buy a cheap clamp to hold the phone, but if you don’t have one, just hold it in both hands and keep your elbows by the side of your body. That will help your stability.

Don’t zoom with the camera because you’ll lose resolution. Zoom with your feet and get closer to the subject you’re filming. If it’s a person please respect social distancing guidelines (see below).
You could buy a lamp to light the shot, but even without one, just use the biggest lamp of them all to your best advantage – the sun! It’s in the sky, so follow the rule bum to the sun. If you’re filming in a room with natural light coming in the window, point your bum towards the sun. If you film towards the window, everything will be in silhouette and we won’t be able to see the faces.

Whilst focusing on the lighting, make sure that you are observing social distancing in any photos or films you are producing. There’s nothing worse than getting a key message spot on, only for it to be directly contradicted by the accompanying picture.

A word of caution, if you are using library or stock pictures make sure that they tell the correct story. It might sound obvious, but if your message is that all local playgrounds are closed, don’t use a stock shot of one that is busy. In most cases, it will be better to use a picture taken on a smartphone that demonstrates the actual situation (i.e. a closure sign) than one that has been professionally shot, is in your picture bank but is out of date.

Sound

Using an external microphone is vital, particularly for interviews, as the phone microphone is designed for calls where the mouth is very close indeed. You could buy an external tie-clip microphone but you’ve probably already got something that will do just as good a job. Take a look at your headphones. Do you see the little white tube on the wire? That’s not just a volume control, it’s also a microphone. With a binder clip (see image below) you’ve just built yourself a homemade tieclip microphone, which will give much better results than the onboard phone mic.

Test it by plugging it in, recording a bit of video and playing it back through the headphones. If it works, you’re good to do an interview.

Smartphone content

An audience needs to see what practical steps you’re taking, but they also need to know why it matters, so an interview with an authority figure is a key part of the package. It’s best to film your interview first, then review it to make sure that the sound has worked (it’s embarrassing to release a senior team member and then have to call them back to apologise that the sound was faulty and we have to do it all again) and so you can make a list of what you need to film to illustrate their points in the edit.

A note about social distancing in video interviews

You’ll notice that professional news organisations have started using ‘boom poles’ (that’s the long stick, usually with a big furry microphone attached to the end that looks a bit like a feather duster!) or tripod stands to hold microphones during interviews, so the camera operator can stand far enough back and zoom in to get a good shot. We’ve already established that
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the zoom function on smartphones is not great, so we need an alternative approach. If your interviewee has a smartphone, then you can use that. You’ll need to provide a tripod and a clamp, as it’s hard for them to hold a phone at arm’s length for the duration of an interview, but please ask them to bring their microphone headphones with them (as above). You don’t need to obtain a hand microphone, as the microphone headphone arrangement we’ve outlined will work perfectly well for recording their answers. Your questions will not be audible on the recording as you’ll be standing two metres away from the microphone. You can compensate for this by instructing your interviewee to include the question in the answer. For example: Q: “What’s the biggest challenge facing local councils during lock down?” A: “During lock down, we’ve found that the biggest challenge for local councils is…”

You’ll also need to make sure their camera app is set to record video in the same mode as yours. This will be easier on an iPhone, as they all implement the settings in the same way, something that cannot be said for android phones, which are all different. For android, we’d recommend referring to the manufacturer’s guidance on how to use the video function. You may also be able to access video tutorials by searching using your make and model online.

For iPhone, talk them through opening the settings app, navigating to the camera menu and confirming what it says on the “Record Video” line of the camera settings page. Depending on how recent their iPhone is, you’ll have a range of resolutions and fps (frames per second). Make sure the settings are the same as your phone, so you can cut together the interview with the other material you will be shooting. As your interviewee to send you the video by text or email once completed.

The interview: where to look and what to say

Do not ask your interviewee to look straight down the lens, as it comes across as a little too direct. Unless you want them to speak directly to the audience e.g. ‘I am asking the public not to come to the Lake District.’ If it is an interview, then most interviews are conducted with a three quarter angle, so ask your interviewee to look a little to the side of the camera. Imagine they’re in a comic strip - you need space for the speech balloon. If you are asking the questions, get them to look at you. If shooting multiple interviews, don’t have everyone look in the same direction. Instead, alternate left and right so the edit doesn’t feel unbalanced. As above, ask your interviewee to include the question in the answer, so we don’t need to hear your (off mic) questions in the edit.

Content of smartphone filming

Use the interview as the basis of your item. Use an editing package like iMovie (free with iPhones) or Kinemaster (free for android) to trim the interview and remove bits at the start and end that you don’t want. There are plenty of online YouTube tutorials on editing in iMovie and Kinemaster. Alternatively, we really like Luma Fusion and here is an online tutorial developed by a colleague and former BBC News Editor. Dan Slee also produces blogs, tutorials and guides for the public sector about shooting and editing videos.

The basic principle is that your edited piece is made up of an interview, with cutaways to what the senior leader is talking about at any one time. That’s why we shoot the interview first (so that afterwards you could go off and get all these cutaway shots). Drop the cutaways onto a second timeline on top of the interview, so the senior leader’s voice continues to be heard even though we’re no longer seeing his or her face.

Pre-recorded smartphone items should be different lengths, according to the outlet you’re aiming at. Here’s a link to a quick guide listing suitable durations for different platforms.

Videos should also be subtitled as a matter of course. Most people watch videos with the sound off, and it’s also important to meet accessibility guidelines. Captions can be added in YouTube or Facebook using their auto-captioning tools. But the captions need to be checked afterwards to ensure they are correct. This approach doesn’t, however, work for Twitter sharing,

5 ‘Cutaways’ are general shots to illustrate the points made in the piece. So, for example, short pieces of video showing an empty playground, if that’s what’s being discussed, or deserted roads, or ambulances arriving at a hospital.
as it doesn’t support the .srt file produced by YouTube. Many councils hard burn captions on to videos using packages like Kinemaster and Biteable, which can then upload the file to Twitter.

Going Live with smartphone video

You could also consider going live, as a lockdown alternative to a Town Hall Q&A for example. In Bristol, for example, elected mayor Marvin Rees is holding these weekly. Live video functions are available on both Facebook (as Facebook Live, for which you’ll need the app) and Periscope, which is now owned by Twitter and has good interactivity with that platform. Both are a good way of reaching and interacting with an audience as they have the unique ability to allow live questions.

Here are some ideas for a good live video:

- Practice ahead of time in private mode (set your app to allow ‘only me’ to see the video)
- Use a good microphone (even your basic headphone and binder clip will be better than the phone’s mic).
- Use your existing channels to publicise when your senior leader will be appearing and on which channel.
- Go live for at least 10 minutes before you start the session in earnest, to give people a chance to log on and find you.
- Answer questions from ‘the floor’. This clearly is a similar challenge to answering questions in a face-to-face Town Hall environment, but it’s important that you engage with people who really do want answers. But don’t feed the trolls, so be prepared to cut off grandstanding and insults that are not really questions. You’ll get credit for dignity under fire and ultimately the trolls end up looking foolish if you’ve got a strong clear message that reaches the vast majority of the audience.

Interviews using video conferencing tools, like Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom

More and more interviews will be taking place using video conferencing tools, and we’ve all been distracted by what’s in the background. It’s easier to look at things rather than listen to messages so you need to get the visuals right to avoid a distracted audience. If you or your officials or elected leaders are doing ‘down the line’ interviews, the following tips could help:

1. **Sort out your background:** Try to find a neutral background. A white wall is usually too plain but a simple bookshelf, a houseplant or a (not too distracting) painting would work. If your living room is visible, make sure it’s tidy and that anything on display is something you’re happy for a stranger to judge! Empty uncarpeted rooms can create an annoying echo so avoid those if possible.

2. **Get the eyeline right:** Your camera will be at the top of your laptop so if it’s on the desk, it’s going to be focusing on the ceiling (and probably creating an unflattering double chin effect). Raise it up so that the camera is level with your eye-line and try to look at the camera rather than your picture on screen. Position yourself around an arm’s length from the camera. Your eyes should be around two-thirds of the way to the top of the picture.

3. **Lighting:** If you are backlit, you can look slightly sinister, which we’d suggest is not the look you’re going for. If the natural light isn’t strong enough, think about a lamp but make sure the light isn’t falling on the screen or lighting you from below. Your lighting source should be in front of you, preferably just slightly above your eyeline when you’re sitting down.

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4 Official council meetings are subject to separate rules. The LGA has just produced guidance covering how these meetings should be conducted and decisions reached and recorded: www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/remote-council-meetings/remote-council-meetings-guidance.

5 LIKE PRACTICE: How do I practice a Facebook Live without anyone seeing it?

6 You should refer to official guidance and use whichever service you are permitted to use by your IT and governance teams.
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4. **What not to wear:** In a crisis, we don’t want you to look groomed to within an inch of your life, so avoid anything other than small and discreet jewellery, ties, fussy scarves or too much make-up. Make sure your hair is neatly tied back so that it’s not going to fall over your face if you lean forward.

5. **Fidgeting:** Try to sit still – even the slightest of movements will be magnified on that screen and will distract the audience from what you’re saying. Avoid eye movement as this will make you appear shift and less trustworthy.

6. **Memorable for all the wrong reasons:** Much as we love the interviews where a cat wanders in or a child interrupts, your interview counts so either banish your family from the house for their daily exercise (preferably accompanied by pets) or at the very least wedge the door shut.

7. **Avoid distractions, close off other computer programmes and put your mobile on silent:** You want people to concentrate on what you have to say, so make sure you’ve considered all your devices and their notifications before your interview. A common one to forget is Whatsapp notifications, even if your phone is on silent, they could still be heard or seen via your laptop. Remove noisy jewellery, like bangles, and avoid chairs or desks that make a noise if you move.

8. **If you forget (or it’s not appropriate) to ask people to remove noisy jewellery:** take a cutaway shot of the jewellery – bangles or large noisy earrings for example – to explain the noise. Once the audience can see where the noise distraction comes from, they zone it out (but if they can’t see where it comes from, it becomes a distraction and ruins the audio).

9. **Rehearsal:** If it’s your official who is going to do the interview, try to have a rehearsal – get them to video call you so you can check out all the above.

**Conclusions**

No document put together against the fast-moving news story and logistical conundrum that is the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis can be anything other than a snapshot. The aim has been to offer some practical advice and support, in the context of our appreciation of the challenges faced by public sector communications teams in 2020. We also understand that for those in the public service, not least the NHS, local government and blue light services, there is a commitment to ‘business as usual’ in unusual times.

The summary of the preceding pages are: for communicators to offer reassurance, reinforcement, and reminders to the audiences they’re seeking to engage. **Faced with mounting and sometimes insurmountable pressures, the best collective advice is to go back to basics:**

- Keep messages simple, consistent and coherent
- Tailor messages to audiences
- Speed is essential, but not at the cost of accuracy and accountability
- Monitor as much as you can, consistently – official and community sources
- Communicate proactively only when you have something new to say (but regularly)
- Network where and when you can, delegate where possible
- Use every available source of back-up and support.

You will, inevitably, make some mistakes and there will be times when the pressure to respond is overwhelming; you are allowed to be human. Although we know that some teams have systems in place for ‘hot’ debriefs, and we recommend good record keeping, the full reviews and retrospectives can come later.
Above all, and we hope it goes without saying, do look after yourselves and your communication team members. Watch out for signs that colleagues are suffering from stress and take steps to support each other where you can.

The LPS committee and Coronavirus (COVID-19) advisory group is available to support public sector communicators.

Do get in touch with emma@allegoryagency.co.uk if you have any questions or requests for further support.

Other, potentially useful, resources

Guide to Down-the-Line interviews

Our colleagues Bob Wade and Ian Cameron of Cameron Wade Communications specialise in crisis communications, and advise the Emergency Planning Society and many local public sector organisations.

They’ve produced this guide to conducting down-the-line interviews:

![Guide to Down-the-Line interviews](cwm-2020-05-18_down_the_line_interviews_web.pdf)
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TOP INTERVIEW TIPS

1. Don’t be bullied into giving an interview if you are not ready – arrange a time with the journalist to call back or to give an interview, so allowing yourself time to prepare properly. Also, by phoning them back, you can check they are a bona fide journalist.

2. Always check whether the interview is live or recorded. If recorded, the journalist won’t mind if you ask to re-do a segment; the journalist wants a compact sound bite as much as you.

3. Keep it core and compact – no matter how complex an issue, you will not have the chance to make more than three key points.

4. Therefore, before the interview work out what are the three key points you want to make.

5. Proof points – always back up your statements with a brief piece of evidence.

6. Use the plain language that the public can understand – short hand terms common in your particular sector may not be understood by the general public. Also, it can actually mean different things to different groups.

7. Use the vocal imagery – don’t reel off figures and percentages, put it into a physical context that your audience can visualise e.g. “an area the size of Wales”, “two football pitches” etc.

8. Don’t fill air time – an old journalistic trick is to stay quiet after you have answered a question, so you feel the need to keep talking, and thus more likely to make a mistake. If you have answered the question, stop talking.

9. When the interview is over, make sure the microphone is turned off before you say anything further – remember all those politicians who didn’t!
Top-lines briefing

Top-lines briefing developed by Surrey County Council communication team for distribution across the Council and wider public sector in the county.

The risk to the UK population: HIGH

First food parcels delivered to clinically vulnerable people

The first food boxes containing essential supplies have been delivered in England to those at highest risk from coronavirus.

- Government confirms first boxes have been delivered to those at highest risk for coronavirus as urgent effort to deliver supplies to those in need since World War Two begins.
- 1.8 million vulnerable people have been identified by the NHS to start at home for 12 weeks with be advised from community pharmacies, who will also be receiving returns from the NHS giving them guidance this week.
- Page 3/10:000 free food boxes containing essential supplies and household items such as pasta and tinned goods will be delivered this weekend.

The first food boxes have been delivered to those vulnerable people being moved from community as the Government moved to support those most in need. See full release here.

Foodbanks – in need of financial donations

Food banks would welcome assistance in the form of financial donations, which can either be made through the individual food banks or by visiting Surrey Information Point for details of local Surrey Foodbanks here.

Alternatively, a financial donation can be made to The Trussell Trust – who look after more than 1,200 food bank centres across the UK. They provide a minimum of three days’ emergency food and support to people experiencing crises. You can make a one-off donation to The Trussell Trust here.

Or Text TRUSSELL then your amount (eg TRUSSELL £5) to 70085

PPE equipment

The SCC PPE cell is continuing to look at additional solutions to ensure security of supply. Revised national guidance on use of PPE in different settings is expected imminently. PPE continues to be a key issue locally.

Surrey community helpline: 0300 200 1008

Announcements

Coronavirus: Six months before UK “returns to normal” – deputy chief medical officer

Useful Links

Surrey County Council Coronavirus Website

Guidance

Guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus COVID-19

Public Health Guidance page

Health advice pages

Stay at Home Guidance for people with confirmed or possible coronavirus

Symptoms of coronavirus

Common questions about coronavirus

Public Health England (PHE) guidance

FIGURES AT A GLANCE – UK

As of 28th March

A total of 127,277 people had been tested in the UK

164,570 were confirmed negative

16,227 positive

England: 16,497

Scotland: 1,284

Wales: 1,241

N. Ireland: 432

As of 28th March, 1,228 patients in the UK who tested positive for coronavirus COVID-19 have sadly died.

PHE figures estimate that there are 338 deaths (Sorbs).

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### Communicating in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis – tips for professional communicators

**Summary of current closures**

- Community Recycling Centres
  - All 15 of Surrey’s community recycling centres are closed, but waste transfer stations are open to support waste and recycling collections. Residents should check with their district or borough council for the latest collection updates and are asked to hold onto excess waste to prevent the service from becoming overwhelmed.

- Surrey libraries
  - Regularly all Surrey libraries are now closed for the foreseeable future. We will keep this under review and will be guided to national developments.

- For all the latest information on library closures and services or offers visit our [website](#).

- Registry Offices
  - Registry offices are currently open to continue with the registration of deaths only.

### Bin collections

We’re doing everything we can to keep bin collections running as normal during the Coronavirus pandemic but it’s likely that some services will be impacted because of staff shortages.

To help us prepare, here are some things that you can do to help:

### Active Surrey – ideas for keeping active at home

Active Surrey has some [great ideas](#) for people to work out at home on its website. Sport England is working on a national campaign and Active Surrey will share the details once they are available.

Just 10 minutes of physical activity a day can benefit your physical and mental health. [10 Today is a short, enjoyable and easy routine.](#)

### Lines to take

- If Members need to respond to queries via social media, the following lines can be used.
- The work being undertaken by Surrey County Council staff at this moment in time is nothing short of Jannival.
- Surrey County Council’s core mission in this is to ensure that we do everything we can to reduce the pressure on the NHS, support our most vulnerable communities and support our staff and residents.
- We will get through this together, thanks to the hard work of our frontline workers, and thanks to the vigilance and shared responsibility of the British public.

### General staff

Across the board our staff are working long hours, adapting to remote working very quickly, and are totally focused on supporting Surrey’s most vulnerable residents and helping our communities deal with this unprecedented challenge.

**Vulnerable people’s hub**

- The Surrey Local Resilience Forum are co-ordinating measures to support the 17,000 most vulnerable in Surrey (who are receiving letters from the NHS).
- The Hub will also the coordination and mobilisation of volunteers and will respond to the needs of our most vulnerable. This may be supporting in the delivery of medicines and food.
- The Hub will also support those who feel isolated in the coming weeks and months who are feeling particularly vulnerable.
- This work will bolster the work that is already underway by a team operating a community helpline 0800 200 1008.

**Schools**

- Numbers of children in schools has been lower than expected, our schools are managing.
- If it’s at all possible for children to be at home, then they should be. The message from central government is clear – if your work is not critical in the response to Coronavirus then please keep your child at home. Even the children of key workers should stay at home if at all possible.

**Media**

There is a very high level of media interest locally, nationally and internationally.

All media queries should be directed to the council’s communications team who will confer with Public Health England as needed. If you are contacted by the media please ask the journalist to contact the comms team and refer any queries you are sent directly to the Director of Communications & Engagement [Andrew Neuman](#) or Head of External Communications [Mike Stringer](#).

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1. Stay at home and save lives. It’s as simple as that. Follow the government advice.
2. Surrey County Council’s core mission in this is to ensure that we do everything we can to reduce the pressure on the NHS, support our most vulnerable communities and support our staff and residents.
3. We will get through this together, thanks to the hard work of our frontline workers, and thanks to the vigilance and shared responsibility of the British public.

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*This is a draft at the time of circulation. If you have any queries about this topic, please contact Surrey County Council Director Communications & Engagement, Andrew Neuman ([Andrew Neuman](#)) or Head of External Communications Mike Stringer ([Mike Stringer](#)).*
Facebook groups

Almost 70 per cent of the UK population use Facebook. However, the number of people who like the public sector Facebook page is rarely more than five per cent of the area’s population. In contrast, research shows the number of people liking community Facebook groups has increased by 86 per cent in the past 12-months. There is an expectation that there are now more community groups than pages in a community.

A Facebook group can be set up through a Facebook page but more often than not they are set-up by members of the community themselves. They can be set up by residents of a housing development, a village, a town or suburb. They can also be people with a shared sense of community such as the Polish community in Stafford or new mums in Clapham. Covid-19 support networks have also sprung up on Facebook.

Groups can play a hugely influential role in the communities and can be a force for good and evil. They can be a source of misinformation or a source of helpful information.

Corporate pages can join community Facebook groups but this is entirely at the discretion of the admins who run the groups. Best practice is to approach the admins of community Facebook groups first to see if they’d be happy for a council or an NHS Trust page to join and contribute to the discussion.

11 RESEARCH: The huge reach of community Facebook pages and groups and how you can connect with them
12 GROUP TREND: 2020 is the year of Facebook groups and here’s the stats to prove it.