Communicating the Pandemic

A qualitative analysis of public responses to official communication about COVID-19

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a formidable communicative challenge. Governments not only need to reach a diverse public with clear messages they can understand. They also need to maintain public trust and persuade individuals to comply with new rules and guidance that curtail some freedoms.

Research suggests public togetherness — a belief 'we're in this together' — is critical to achieving such compliance (Jetten et al. 2020; Tomasini 2021; West-Oram 2021). Yet sustaining public togetherness is difficult when the threat the pandemic poses and the costs of compliance are not shared equally among groups (B. Prainsack and Buyx 2011; P. Prainsack 2020).

In previous research, we began to chart how the UK government is faring with this communicative challenge (Coleman et al. 2020). Through three representative surveys of the UK population in August 2020, we found marked differences in how the public were engaging with, evaluating, and acting in response to official information. A sizeable proportion of the public lacked interest in official information, others lacked confidence in either government or medical experts, and behaviour in response to official information varied significantly. We also found differences in people's general outlook on the pandemic (Douglas 1999; Wildavsky and Dake 1990). Whereas some took more 'communitarian' views, convinced of the need for individuals and government to act collectively for the public good, others were more 'individualist', not viewing the pandemic as such a grave threat and favouring more scope for individual judgement. We captured key differences in respondents' views, experiences, and behaviour through a segmentation analysis that identified six segments, each of which share attributes and represent a significant proportion of the UK population. A summary of these segments and how they compare in relation to key dimensions are outlined in Table 1.[1]

In this report, we build on the picture generated through the survey research by conducting follow-up focus groups with members of the public aligned with the six segments. Considering the different perspectives and experiences of our participants, we evaluate the extent to which the communication of official information has promoted public understanding, confidence, and compliance. In the process, we identify key barriers to achieving these objectives in practice and insights about how communication could be improved in future.

Drawing on our analysis, we make two main arguments in conclusion. Firstly, for the public to be able to follow and understand information, maximum clarity and consistency in information and how information is delivered is critical (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021). Not only do specific messages need to be clear and consistent, but the public needs help to navigate a complex information environment and distinguish among different types and channels of information. Secondly, to promote public confidence and compliance, a more deliberative approach to decision-making is essential (Pearse 2020; Scheinerman and McCoy 2021; The Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2020; Moore and MacKenzie 2020). Ensuring a wide range of views are consulted can build confidence in both political decisions and scientific judgements. In addition, listening to differently-situated groups — ensuring their specific circumstances are acknowledged and unfairness is addressed — is necessary in order to develop 'solidarity-supportive policies' (Fuks et al. 2021, see also West-Oram 2021) that can sustain the public togetherness that underpins compliance. Put simply, maintaining public togetherness means recognizing public difference.

1 Table 1 outlines how the segments compare in relation to key dimensions of significance to this report. A full description of the segments and the process through which they were arrived at is available in Coleman et al., 2020.

Before we begin, we would like to note a limitation in the scope of our analysis. While the four nations of the UK adopted a similar approach to the pandemic initially, their policies diverged from May 2020 onwards and the devolved governments communicated with their respective publics accordingly (see Tatlow et al. 2021 for an account of the different policy approaches). Unfortunately, the numbers of research participants from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in our sample were too small to capture and consider these differences in policy and communication systematically. As a result, our analysis focuses on communication by the central UK government, who are responsible for policy in England as well as some measures that affect the whole of the UK.

Table 1: Six segments

	SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS						
SEGMENTS	**COVID communitarian**	**COVID individualist**	**Interest in information**	**Behaviour associated with risks**	**Experience of COVID**	**Vulnerability to COVID**	**Evaluation of government communication**
1	Average	Significantly above average	Average	Significantly above average	Above average	Average	Average
2	Significantly below average	Average	Significantly below average	Average	Average	Average	More positive than average
3	Above average	Below average	Above average	Average	Average	Average	Significantly more positive than average
4	Below average	Significantly above average	Below average	Average	Below average	Below average	Average
5	Significantly above average	Significantly below average	Above average	Average	Average	Average	Significantly more negative than average
6	Significantly above average	Below average	Above average	Below average	Above average	Above average	Average

Based on Coleman et al., 2020: 13-15.

2. Methodology

This report is based on a series of focus groups designed to build on findings from an earlier phase of survey research. Whereas our survey was based on closed questions with fixed responses, focus groups allow research participants to respond to open questions in their own terms and listen and respond to the views and experiences of others. The flexible nature of focus groups means themes that are important to participants can be picked up and pursued in more depth. The focus groups allowed us to build on the broad picture generated by our survey research, exploring the views and experiences of research participants in greater depth.

Because of social distancing necessitated by the pandemic, the focus groups were conducted online. Each lasted between 60-90 minutes. We asked participants questions in the following areas: the government's response to the pandemic, whether and how they followed official information, whether and how they understood official information, how they evaluated government communication and felt it could be improved, and what their expectations were for the future. To aid memory and facilitate discussion, we also showed participants a short video clip of Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and one of Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, communicating information about the pandemic.[2] (See Appendix 1 for the focus-group discussion guide.)

We completed 16 focus groups in total, involving 72 participants. Most groups had between 4-8 participants as planned, although we only managed to recruit 2-3 participants for four of the 16 groups. We recruited participants who had completed the survey previously and opted-in to participate in follow-up research, which enabled us to select groups based on the segmentation analysis.[3] We conducted two focus groups with members of each of the six segments and four mixed groups (see Appendix 2 for a list of focus groups). Using the segmentation as the basis for sampling ensured our sample reflected key variables that our survey research had shown were significant at a UK population level (see Appendix 3 for a demographic breakdown of our sample).

The focus groups were video recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. They were analysed by the authors in terms of how they addressed the following key research questions:

1. How have members of the public engaged with official information about pandemic?
2. How have members of the public understood official communication about the pandemic?
3. How have members of the public evaluated official information about the pandemic?
4. How have members of the public acted upon official information about the pandemic?
5. What experiences and views explain differences in how members of the public have received, understood, evaluated, and acted upon official information?

2 The Boris Johnson clip was taken from a national address on 22 September 2020, and the Chris Whitty clip from a briefing on 21 September 2020.

3 We informed participants that they had been selected for the study based on their survey responses and that groups had been formed on this basis. To avoid influencing the findings, participants did not know the make-up of specific groups before the research began. However, the findings (showing the alignment between the focus groups and specific segments) were shared with participants subsequently and they were given another opportunity at this stage to comment, ask questions, and withdraw from the research without explanation and without incurring any disadvantage.

3. Understanding official information

The government must reach a diverse public with clear messages they can understand. Without receiving comprehensible information, the public will not know how to act to keep themselves and others safe. As we describe, there was a general perception in our focus groups that official information had become more complex and changeable after the first lockdown period and more difficult to follow (Section 3.1). Yet the implications of this varied for participants. Reflecting differences among the six segments, participants engaged with official information to different degrees, which affected how well they could keep up with and understand more complex and changeable information (Section 3.2).

3.1. A complex and changeable information environment

There was a widely shared perception across our focus groups that official information about the pandemic had become more complex and changeable. In the first lockdown period in March-May 2020, the government's message was a simple one. A clear injunction to 'stay at home' was reflected tangibly in the closure of key parts of the physical environment outside people's homes. Yet the rules and guidance became more complex and changeable after the first lockdown period and messages were harder to follow as a result.

Even during the first lockdown, not all information was easily understood. For example, while people knew they could exercise locally, not all participants were sure how a 'local area' was defined. Such interpretive difficulties became more pronounced after the lockdown, where the public were still required to follow rules and guidance around social distancing, isolation periods, and so on, but some freedoms were restored and exceptions introduced. Finding it more difficult to follow information, some participants described becoming confused at this time:

> **P1:** Yeah, I think, at the start, it was very clear, it was stay at home. And then as the restrictions gradually eased, there were as P5 was saying, there were a lot of exceptions, oh you can do this, but only this or you might be able to do this. And that's where things started to get quite confusing. (Segment 1, Group 2)
>
> **P4:** So when we were going into lockdown in March, I felt that was a really clear message and we all knew what we were doing. And then, by the time it got to July and we were starting to come out of it, I think that's when all the mixed messages started and that's when the confusion began. (Segment 4, Group 1)
>
> **P4:** So again, when we first went into lockdown, it was an easy message. It was stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives. We knew what we could do, you could go out for an hour, you could, you could not meet anybody, etc. etc. So that was clear. And things needed obviously to relax in some way, where we had a lengthy period over the summer of some pretty lax stuff and certainly going into these, the tier situation, many rapid u-turns again, so not a clear message. (Mixed, Group 4)

As well as having difficulty understanding specific rules or guidance, participants explained that it was not always easy for them to distinguish between the two. In other words, the line between what was required by law and what was merely recommended was fuzzy and unclear.

After the first lockdown period, the message 'stay at home' was replaced by the less immediately understandable phrase 'stay alert'. Some participants mocked this phrase:

> **P2:** When we got to the point of 'Stay Alert', when that phrase raised its head, that's when I think he [Boris Johnson] lost it entirely. You can't stay alert for a virus. It's not hiding round a corner that will leap out behind you with a hammer, is it? You can't see it so what is there to be alert for? The whole point is that it's invisible, that's why it's scary isn't it. (Segment 4, Group 2)
>
> **P4.** And when they have these taglines of how you are supposed to behave and one of them being 'Stay Alert'. It's a virus, you can't see it, it's the most intangible objective or goal to stay alert. I thought it was farcical. (Segment 5, Group 1)

The 'stay alert' message appeared to signal both the return of some freedoms and the need for individuals to act responsibly by following new rules and guidance. In Section 5, we note how participants responded to this messaging differently, reflecting more individualist or communitarian outlooks: whereas some valued more scope for individual judgement, recognizing differences in individual circumstances, others advocated more definite rules and stronger enforcement to address non-compliance. But, either way, more onus was placed on individuals to engage with — to 'stay alert' to — government rules and guidance during this period.

One factor that made understanding information more difficult was its changing nature. While restrictions were eased over the summer, with the Government even urging people 'to eat out to help out' in August, restrictions were reapplied in the autumn. In England, the 'rule of six' and a 10pm curfew on pubs and restaurants were introduced in September and a tier system implemented in October. This culminated in another four-week lockdown period in November, followed by the introduction of a new 'tougher' tier system. There was then a temporary relaxation of rules over Christmas before another national lockdown was introduced in January 2021. As we describe in Section 4, participants evaluated the government's handling of the pandemic differently: some felt the government was doing well to balance priorities in an unprecedented situation, while others felt they lacked clear policy priorities, resulting in mixed and inconsistent messaging. However, as several participants noted, there is little doubt that the labile nature of rules and guidance gave the public less time to familiarize themselves with them and made understanding information more difficult:

> **P4:** They'll say one thing on Monday, by Wednesday they've changed their mind and by Friday they'll be back onto Monday's idea. It's just impossible to keep up. (Mixed, Group 1)
>
> **P3:** I think they're being communicated but it's just too many things are being communicated so often that it's hard to keep up with them and I think if they just set rules and kind of set them at what they needed to be done instead of changing them all the time they need to just make up their mind and I think that will probably make it a lot more clear to people if it's just the same rules so that they don't keep changing, because they seem to never stop changing. (Mixed, Group 2)

Another confounding factor was the differentiation of policy across parts of the UK. While the four nations adopted a similar approach at first, policy diverged from May 2020 onwards (Tatlow et al. 2021). Meanwhile, local lockdowns and the tier system meant different rules and guidance came to be applied at sub-national level. Tailoring messages to different localities is challenging.

In addition, unless clearly justified, treating groups differently can create perceptions of unfairness. For example, several participants affected by the tier system felt it reproduced regional inequalities by privileging London over the rest of the country. As one participant described:

> **P1:** I'm in Greater Manchester and we're going back in Tier 3, but we got lower numbers but London's Tier 2. So to me that doesn't make sense but I think in London they're thinking more about the economy, keeping their economy going, and you know, forget the rest of the country. (Segment 4, Group 1)

A belief that you are being forgotten or not being treated fairly undermines a sense of public togetherness and may have implications for the public's willingness to comply with rules and guidance (Steffens 2020). We return to this point in Section 5.

The way our participants described the information environment after the first lockdown echo our survey findings. In our survey research in August 2020, we found that almost two thirds (63%) of respondents were overwhelmed by the different messages they were receiving, while over a third (37%) told us they found it difficult to make sense of information (Coleman et al., 2020). Yet behind these headline figures are significant differences among groups. Participants engaged with official communication about the pandemic in varying ways — ranging from those who were highly engaged to those who were disengaged — with different implications for how well they were able to follow and understand complex and changeable information.

3.2. Different modes of engagement

Public interest in information about the pandemic varies significantly. In line with the segmentation analysis, participants in our focus groups reflected those differences. Some groups tend to have higher levels of interest (Segments 3, 5 and 6), whereas others have moderate (Segment 1) or low levels (Segments 2 and 4). We outline below how our participants engaged with official information and what the implications are for their ability to follow and make sense of information. We cannot reproduce the full richness of our participants' accounts here. For analytical purposes, we distinguish and compare three key modes of engagement: the COVID informed (Section 3.2.1), the COVID monitorial (Section 3.2.2) and the COVID disengaged (Section 3.2.3).

Image: COVID-19 Press Conference, 09/09/2020, Nº 10 Downing Street,London, United Kingdom. Picture by Pippa Fowles.

3.2.1. COVID informed

The COVID informed seek information about the pandemic consistently, following developments closely. For example, when we asked participants if they have been keeping up with official information, one told us how they[4] used different sources of information, received updates 'constantly', and were 'connected all of the time':

> **P1:** Yeah, I will always put the news on as soon as I get home, but constantly I've got news alerts coming up on my phone. I will check the BBC News website three or four times a day and I have to say I daily check the infection rate and the death rate, especially in my area. And think we do get quite a lot of decent information on the local BBC News, I can pop in my post code and find out how many in my area and what what's happening. So you know sometimes it's reassuring, sometimes it's not. But yes, I'm unfortunately connected all of the time. (Segment 3, Group 2)

The COVID informed are most able to navigate the complex, changeable information environment described in Section 3 and most likely to feel confident in their understanding of official information. As one participant explained: 'In terms of the actual rules and things, I've had no problem. The rules are very clear to me' (Segment 6, Group 1). However, the COVID informed may still experience difficulties. Constant connection is a problem when government messages change as they are translated by and refracted through different media sources. One engaged participant, for example, explained their frustration when press leaks turn out to be inaccurate. They tried to weave separate pieces of information together but were left uncertain:

> **P2:** I've been very concerned at how the government were getting out – things were being leaked all time to the press before we got the true opinion from the government. So you think, oh no, we're going to go into lockdown and then it turned out that we weren't at all. […] So it depended again me watching too much I think. And listening to too much. I've seen so many different things, so you piece it all together and probably get the wrong answer at the end. So I wonder why so much was leaked. Why did they do it in the papers or the news before we heard it from the government? (Segment 6, Group 2)

As expected, high levels of engagement were most evident in Segments 3, 5 and 6. These segments tend to be more communitarian than individualist in how they view the pandemic, seeing it as a significant threat that individuals and government have a responsibility to work collectively to address. Although they share the communitarian outlook and high interest in information about the pandemic, members of Segment 5 are less likely to have confidence in the current UK government and this can affect how they engage with information.

4 When we refer to participants, we use the singular 'they' as a pronoun in this report. See https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/

For example, although they do seek information, some participants from this segment told us forcefully that they no longer engage with some official sources:

> **P7:** But as for the way the government has handled it. I can't really think of anything that they've done promptly or efficiently, and I just ignore them, really. I just look at the details on the websites. I don't want to see them or hear them. (Segment 5, Group 1)
>
> **P3:** But as time went on, I just got more and more frustrated with them and the confusion that they were sowing, I just tend to look it up online and afterwards just make sure that where I'm looking is, you know a reputable source and giving me the correct facts and I've kind of stopped watching the government briefings because they just make me so cross. (Segment 5, Group 1)

We consider how our participants evaluated the communication of official information in more depth in Section 4.

3.2.2 COVID monitorial

Not everyone consistently seeks out new information about the pandemic. The media historian, Michael Schudson (2000), suggests citizens may engage with information in a 'monitorial' way. Unlike 'informed citizens', the 'monitorial' do not seek to 'know all the issues all of the time', but to be 'informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good' (Schudson 2000, 16). Being monitorial involves 'environmental surveillance more than information-gathering' (Schudson 1999). It is akin, Schudson (1999) suggests, to 'parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene'.
We draw on this idea to describe a second way of engaging with information about the pandemic.

The COVID monitorial do not consume information as consistently and actively as the COVID informed, but they aim to be connected enough — through some news consumption and personal networks of family, friends, and co-workers — not to miss key developments. For example, one participant described how information about the pandemic is not something they seek out, but it is there in the 'background'. Importantly, they are confident that they would be aware of big developments that might affect them should they happen:

> **P2:** I don't make a point of putting on the news on the telly every day to listen to, but while I'm working, the radio is still on, so it's more kind of it's there. The information's in the background. One of my daughter's is actually, she's pretty good, she always wants to know what the update is. If we're in the car with the radio on and then you know she hears 'latest news', she'll always tell us shush and turn it up. So it's kind of there, but more kind of in the background. And I'm sure if there was a big announcement I would A) make a point of wanting to listen, listen to it or hear it. And B) sort of, you know, actually want to take notice and see how it's gonna affect myself and my family. (Segment 1, Group 1)

Once the COVID monitorial are aware of relevant information, they can decide to engage more. The difficulty is to ensure they do not miss key developments. As information becomes more complex and fast-changing, information surveillance becomes more demanding. Despite government appeals to 'stay alert', things of importance may be overlooked.

In line with the segmentation, a moderate level of interest in information is most typical of Segment 1. Yet there was evidence of monitorial engagement in other groups too, where participants tended to be neither highly engaged nor disengaged. Several participants told us that they were more highly engaged with information at the start of the pandemic. Sensing a 'danger to their personal good and danger to the public good' (Schudson 2000: 16), they wanted to know more. But interest waned and only returned to this level, if at all, in waves related to key developments. Some participants mentioned news fatigue as a reason for engaging less. Participants described how staying up to date with changing rules and guidance was tiring, involving consistent news consumption and additional information seeking. Other factors may also be relevant. Compared to the most engaged (Segments 3, 5 and 6), other groups (Segments 1, 2 and 4) tend to be less communitarian and more individualist in how their view the pandemic: in other words, they do not view the pandemic as such a significant threat and/or favour more scope for individual judgment. Some also have a lack of confidence in those responsible for communicating information. We mentioned how participants from Segment 5 tend to be critical of government. As we will discuss in the next section, some participants lack confidence in scientific experts and evidence, a view most typical of Segment 2.

3.2.3 COVID disengaged

Unlike both the COVID informed and the COVID monitorial, the COVID disengaged actively avoid official information. Some participants, for example, told us they do not follow information or talk to others about it. They felt they were not learning anything new and they were tired of the pandemic:

> **P1:** Now I'm probably after about three months of it, I couldn't care less. Because there's nothing telling me anything new. And as I stated, it's just one day this, one day that. And I'm just, I think like quite a lot of people, sick of talking about it, sick of living with it, and sick of dealing with it. (Segment 2, Group 2)
>
> **P3:** Yes I think a lot of people don't, just don't really want to talk about it anymore. They're fed up with seeing it and hearing about it. And even if you try and sort of talk to family about it, they don't want to know, or anything. (Segment 2, Group 2)

The COVID disengaged are least likely to follow messages about official rules and guidance. As noted by Stephen Reicher (2021), 'not everybody listens to the news or what politicians say', but 'what they see is what the regulations are doing'. Therefore, he reminds us, 'laws and regulations can't be separated from the messaging, they are the messaging'. During the first lockdown, as noted above, a simple message to 'stay at home' was echoed through the closure of key parts of the physical environment outside the home. In the more complex and changeable information environment that followed, rules and guidance were easier to overlook.

While levels of engagement varied across our participants, only a small number of our participants told us they were disengaged. Yet the proportion of the population that falls into this category is sizeable. In our survey research, for example, over one fifth (21%) of respondents told us they were not interested in official information (Coleman et al 2020).

As expected from the segmentation analysis, disengagement was most evident among Segments 2 and 4, both of which are characterised by lower interest in pandemic information. The factors associated with engagement mentioned above may all be relevant here: a more individualist outlook, limited experience of COVID, a perception of low risk, news fatigue, and/or a lack of confidence in those communicating information.

Disengagement was also explained by the media's predominant focus on the 'negative' or 'depressing' aspects of the pandemic, such as human tragedy. Some participants felt that the media's negative focus was overwhelming and could be detrimental to mental health. This was particularly the case for participants whose lives had been adversely affected (e.g., they had lost their job):

> **P1:** I didn't want to talk to it, about with anyone. That's just my own personal- I mean I got hit quite hard because I'm a self-employed chef. So I got hit quite hard. […] But I don't really want to talk about things that make me slightly depressed. So my choice was just not to talk about it. And you know, and the old chestnut of hoping it will go away situation. But that's just me personally. I didn't like to hear about it. Or I didn't like to speak about it. I know the information was there. But as I've stated, as I felt it was a bit sort of mixed messages, nothing really being done. There was nothing positive. The lady said earlier, it was quite negative and I completely agree. And that's exactly the situation what I didn't want to be in a negative, you know. (Segment 2, Group 2)

For some participants, avoiding information about the pandemic was a way for them to alleviate or at least not aggravate anxiety about their predicament and the future.

4. Confidence in official information

As well as receiving information they can understand, the public needs to have confidence in this information. Yet levels of trust in government and scientific experts vary across the population, differences that are again reflected in the segmentation. Our participants ranged from those who tend to be more supportive of government (Segment 3) to those who are critical (Segment 5) or more likely to be sceptical about scientific experts and evidence (Segments 2 and 4). As we describe, participants who were supportive or charitable felt the government had not done a bad job in difficult circumstances and retained confidence in them (Section 4.1). Other participants were critical of the government's political leadership and communication (Section 4.2) or of the scientific experts and evidence used (Section 4.3).

4.1. Supportive and charitable evaluations

A common view among those who were supportive or at least charitable in their evaluations of government was that the pandemic was an unprecedented crisis. Given exceptional circumstances, the government had not done a bad job. Changes in messages reflected genuine attempts by the government to get to grips with an unfolding pandemic. The following exchange illustrates this view:

> **P1:** I think that the whole thing is an unknown and the government have been sort of running with, basically, a ball that's bouncing all over the place and they've basically had to check it. There is no right and wrong answers and the criticism they have come under has been very unjust.
>
> **P2:** I'm totally in agreement with that. That's how I've been feeling all the way along, just think they've been trying their best with the unknown. We don't know what's going on – but they didn't either and they have been trying their best. (Segment 6, Group 2)

Those who were supportive felt the government faced unviable trade-offs between competing priorities, such as saving lives, keeping the economy going, and protecting people's mental health:

> **P5:** I'd hate to do his [Boris Johnson's] job. He's trying to balance the collapse of the economy against saving lives. [Agreement]
>
> **P2:** Yeah, I mean he's never going to please everybody and who would want his job (Segment 3, Group 1)

There was sympathy with the predicament government faced across groups, even though, not surprisingly, it was least evident among the most critical (Segment 5). In line with the segmentation, members of Segment 3 tended to view government communication more sympathetically and display more confidence.

For some supporters of government, another factor contributing to difficulties with communication was a hostile media environment. Some participants felt that the way the media covered the pandemic made information difficult for people to understand and accept.

For example, participants described how the media 'put their own political spin on it', were 'biased', or 'second guessed' official communication and 'muddied the waters':

> **P5:** Our press can't be relied on to report news, they are always going to put their own political spin on it. They seem to be getting worse, not better. In a sort of crisis like this, it should have brought them to their senses, but it seems to have done the exact opposite. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P3:** You get different things on the news; you get bias in the media; you don't always get straight information anymore, so it is quite hard to… from a communication point of view, to understand. (Segment 6, Group 1)
>
> **P2:** I think the only thing is that there has been a lot of information floating around in the press about trying to second guess what the government's going to do and what it's not going to do. Ministers and the opposition parties are all putting their two pennies worth in and it's kind of muddied the waters somewhat. (Segment 3, Group 1)

Some noted that the media's extensive coverage of Dominic Cummings' rules-breaking was politically motivated and detrimental to the public's understanding of the necessity of following the rules and the seriousness of the risks involved. The media needs to show, as another participant concluded, 'greater responsibility' (Segment 3, Group 2)

4.2. Critical evaluations of government

Other participants were more critical of the government's leadership and communication. While they recognized the unprecedented nature of the crisis, they felt the government could have done better and some drew unfavourable comparisons with other countries to illustrate this. The most critical believed the government had lost public confidence. Echoing a participant quote above, one participant referred to 'muddy waters', but viewed this as a consequence of poor government communication and declining public trust:

> **P4:** The general problem is that the general message is so bad that people have found it quite hard to actually know what they're supposed to do. And once you start losing that trust then you're into difficult water, muddy waters really. (Segment 5, Group 2)

In line with the segmentation, critical views were most pronounced in Segment 5. However, there was evidence of some critical evaluation across groups.

Those who were critical felt the government lacked a clear policy to address the pandemic. They thought messages were inconsistent and gave different impressions of what the government was trying to achieve. Reflecting on the need to balance competing priorities, one participant told us:

> **P2:** It's been a bit of haphazard kind of effort [by the UK government] at trying to find that balance. And so you are having like, you're getting one impression initially and saying go out, eat out to help out. And then you immediately, oh it's spiking again. And you're seeing early September, mid-September and later September it's gone up and up and up.

> And suddenly it's like oh actually, let's go back into considerable lockdown. And let's, let's revisit the tier system and then touch upon that. And just as people are trying, just because the key thing is that people are going to get used to something and then it just changes. And then we're like, oh we're in limbo now. And I think the fact that it got to the point at which we were nearing Christmas, and we're like okay, you've got the plan so you can now go out, and see your - you can go and see your family, get together. And then just days beforehand you've then taken that away again. It didn't feel like a consistent message of saying, what are you trying to balance here? Are you trying to balance wellbeing alongside the economy, alongside health? Or what are you trying to balance here? And it's never been clear. (Segment 2, Group 2).

Concerns around the fairness of rules and guidance was another theme. In Section 3, using the tier system as an example, we described how treating groups differently without clear justification can lead to perceptions of unfairness. A participant who is a teacher offered another example. They thought teachers were not being protected like other groups and so felt enraged and 'really hurt' by government communication:

> **P4:** I get annoyed when they're protecting everybody except me and I hear everybody else going on furlough, being protected, working from home - Government's arm round everybody else, and I'm thinking I am so angry. You are not protecting us even with PPE, like the nurses […] So, for me the communication was horrendous, when I heard these… when they are being so kind to everybody else and horrid to me. That's the way I felt it, so I am afraid that the communication really hurt. (Segment 6, Group 1)

Unfairness was raised in a different guise when participants commented on the apparent hypocrisy of politicians and political advisors. Episodes involving Dominic Cummings and Boris Johnson were mentioned, as was keeping the bars open in the Houses of Parliament. One participant said:

> **P5:** [there should not be] what appears to be one rule for everybody else and then one rule for them and all their friends. So, their bars were still open and fine when everybody else couldn't go to the pub. At that point you think, well is it safer for you than for us? Or is this just a thing where you kind of feel that you should be telling us to do this to be seen to be doing something, but you don't really believe it's going to make that much difference? So it just feels like there is a little bit too much kind of hypocrisy there. (Segment 5, Group 1)

Not surprisingly, concerns about double standards were expressed more strongly by the most critical, but they were not limited to them. All segments, for example, mentioned the controversy over Dominic Cummings. One participant from Segment 3 said: 'I'm pro Tory - I don't have a problem with admitting that. The only time I thought it was a little bit disingenuous was with the incident with Dominic Cummings. I think he should have gone straightaway' (Segment 3, Group 2).

Some critics of government communication felt it needed to be more direct and authoritative. This was evident when people commented on the communicative style of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. Several participants, including those who said they supported him, thought he was not definitive enough.

One participant referred to his 'softly, softly approach':

> **P1:** Yeah, I don't think they ever gave us anything definitive though, that we could walk away from. Every time we had those daily meetings it was just so softly, softly in terms of their approach. Like obviously we're speaking, and hopefully he's [Boris Johnson's] speaking to adults and people who are, you know, going to take that onboard. But sometimes I really feel like it was a real, softly, softly approach. Like it was like, go to work if you can go to work, but if you can't, you know it was just really conflicting like this softly, softly approach. I just don't know why he wasn't more definitive and said you're not to go outside, you're not to mix with other people. (Segment 1, Group 1)

The most critical felt Johnson was indirect to avoid being accountable for decisions or because of a fear of becoming unpopular. Where more sympathetic participants felt the Prime Minister was attempting to balance different priorities and interests in society, others saw weak leadership:

> **P4:** Personally, I see that what the government is doing, what Boris [Johnson] is doing, how I perceive what Boris is doing is he's absolutely terrified of being unpopular, so he's trying to please all the people all the time. […] You can't win all the arguments all the time and I see it as poor leadership. That is, I know just my opinion. I see it as poor leadership, instead of being firm. (Segment 5, Group 1)

Some participants from both England and Scotland compared Johnson unfavourably to Nicola Sturgeon, viewing her as more authoritative. As one participant recalled: 'I remember one press conference she gave where she basically said: "look, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you". And I think that's what was needed at that point' (Segment 4, Group 1).

A final theme related to the knowledge and understanding of political leaders themselves. Some participants felt Boris Johnson and other senior politicians did not have sufficient understanding of the information they were relaying or the rules and guidance they were asking others to follow:

> **P3:** I think when Boris [Johnson] talks you get the feeling that he doesn't really know what he's talking about. That he's briefed, but he doesn't really get it. […] if Boris gets a question, you know he'll get facts wrong, he'll say the wrong thing. He doesn't know. He'll say things like oh well, I don't want to go into detail now and it's just you know, it just feels like he doesn't really get the rules, or he doesn't really understand what's going on. (Segment 5, Group 1)
>
> **P2:** I think that they haven't had a full grasp of what's been needed. So in terms of when they've been giving interviews or doing the meetings, they haven't necessarily understood what they're saying themselves about what's going to happen. And that then led to a lot of confusion from the general public with them then needing to ask questions and have more answers to get like a clearer understanding of what's being asked them. (Segment 5, Group 2)

When politicians have difficulty explaining information, it is not only a missed opportunity to promote public understanding, but also reinforces the perception that the rules and guidance may be too complex for the public to comprehend and follow.

4.3. Scepticism towards scientific evidence

Regardless of their confidence in government, most participants supported scientific and medical experts, such as the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Patrick Vallance, the Chief Medical Officer for England, Chris Whitty, and the Deputy Chief Medical Officers for England, Jenny Harries and Jonathan Van-Tam. Many wanted to hear from experts more, believing them to be more knowledgeable about the pandemic than political leaders. Yet some participants were less convinced by the scientific evidence being used, reflecting another key difference among segments. These views were most evident among Segments 2 and 4. Some participants from these groups wanted more questions to be addressed by the scientific experts to alleviate doubts:

> **P4:** But what I found frustrating was when people were asking questions that they didn't answer them. The questions were very relevant. It was on national radio, people were wanting answers and just seem to keep repeating, we're following the science. Which science? There are many scientists who are saying, well there is no pandemic. And there was all this thing away from answering the questions and I found that very frustrating and they lost credibility in some respects. I felt they were hiding something, the fact that they wouldn't answer. (Segment 4, Group 2)
>
> **P1:** People are dying with COVID or of COVID. Are people just dying anyway and happened to be tested and found they did have COVID-19 and let's put that down as cause of death? (Segment 2, Group 1)

Appearing overly certain about scientific evidence that is still developing can make later shifts in rules and guidance more difficult to explain and understand (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Moore and MacKenzie, 2020). Not addressing doubts adequately may also feed into conspiratorial thinking. As one participant explained, failing to answer questions gives 'an entry point for all these people who believe every conspiracy going':

> **P2:** And like the other lady was saying about them not answering questions because it just gives an entry point for all these people who believe every conspiracy going, you know, oh it's all a hoax and they're lying. I don't necessarily think they're lying but would it kill them to say, we don't know. Because at some point they didn't know. They're trying to announce stuff while scientists are still researching it. This is the point of science isn't it, it doesn't end. They're always researching and at some point they had no idea but no one would ever actually admit that they had no idea. If they'd said, oh we don't really know but try wearing a mask it might help, rather than looking as if they're being shifty and got something to hide. (Segment 4, Group 2)

Indeed, more than other groups, participants in Segments 2 and 4 mentioned being exposed frequently to conspiracy-oriented discourses about the pandemic's existence and origins — at work, on social media, or elsewhere.

5. Acting on official information

The government not only needs to ensure the public receives messages they understand and trust, but also encourage them to follow rules and guidance for the public good, even when some individuals may perceive the threat posed by the pandemic to be low and the cost of compliance to be high (Prainsack and Buyx, 2011 Prainsack 2020). Previous research points to the importance of 'public togetherness' in motivating individuals to act collectively (Jetten et al 2020). As we describe below, feelings of solidarity were evident at the start of the pandemic, as the public responded to a common threat. However, public togetherness waned by the time of our focus groups and perceptions of non-compliance increased (Section 5.1). Reflecting a final key fault line among segments, participants were divided in how they viewed rule-breaking. Some appeared more willing to countenance non-compliance, especially given the different circumstances individuals face and the perceived unfairness of some rules (Section 5.2). Other participants were frustrated by their belief that others are not doing the right thing and felt it undermined public togetherness (Section 5.3). The tension between these different views go to the heart of responding to the pandemic effectively. Public togetherness is necessary for public compliance. However, for public togetherness to be sustained over time, the different situations of groups need to be acknowledged and perceived unfairness must be addressed (Fuks et al 2021, West-Oram 2021).

5.1. Declining public togetherness

Common threats, such as pandemics, are known to generate feelings of public solidarity and willingness to act collectively. As John Dovidio, Elif Ikizer, Jonas Kunst and Aharon Levy (2020: 142) note, 'Threat makes social identity salient and so increases solidarity, cooperation and norm compliance within the group'. Several participants described how, despite being asked to maintain distance from one another physically, a sense of public togetherness emerged at the beginning of the pandemic. Participants were drawn together by a shared concern, offered support to one another, and valued what they held in common:

> **P5:** The topic of conversation was frequently lock down, but I got to speak to a lot more people and get to know them more than I ever had done before. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P2:** Cause I've spoken to a lot of people in the last six months, a lot of people saying that they're going to take more time thinking about their nearest and not what or whose yacht Ed Sheeran's on this weekend. Cause it doesn't matter. If that Smith character has a meltdown in his mansion it doesn't matter. But it does matter if the little old lady along the street is struggling to get the shop. And also about donating to charity. Food banks and handing in clothes to the local charity shop. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P1:** Oh absolutely, yes. I think we now we appreciate the people around us a little bit more than we did before. We were sort of a bit of a throwaway society and you throw away everything, including your friends and neighbours and acquaintances. And I think now people are just a little bit more aware of, especially people on their own and old people. And it's been quite nice, I live in quite a small village and it's there is a real, real, quite nice sense of community. Where there always has been, it's quite a small place, but people are actually going out of their way to make an effort rather than just, you know, help if help is needed. They're going out of their way to see whether or not they can help. I had people around asking if I wanted my shopping done and that sort of thing. (Segment 3, Group 2)

Some participants felt this sense of public solidarity persisted up to the time of our focus groups, although this view may have been more typical of people living in certain contexts than others (e.g., rural as opposed to urban environments). In fact, more participants felt solidarity declined over time and a more individualist outlook developed (see Fuks et al 2021 for similar findings in the Netherlands). For example, one participant said everybody was now 'out for their own', while another felt the 'common goal' of the pandemic had not been 'strong enough to bring people together' in a sustained way:

> **P2:** Initially the community spirit and everything, helping each other out and stuff was really inspiring. I sometimes feel like we've lost that again now and everybody is kind of out for their own and what they can do in their situation and how they can make the best of it for them. Whereas I was kind of thinking that the community feel would last longer than it has done in Plymouth. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P3:** Even Sir Tom Moore in the beginning, I think something like that, what he was doing was kind of bringing everyone together because everyone was cheering him on and wanting him to do it. I think it's a bit sad, because the common goal that we should all have is coming to the end of this and doing what we need to do to get through it. It doesn't seem to be strong enough to bring people together. (Segment 3, Group 1)

In parallel with declining solidarity and rising individualism, there was a perception that some people were less inclined to follow the rules than previously and more likely to engage in riskier behaviour. For example, one participant said they felt people had become 'reckless':

> **P6:** I feel like during the first lockdown in March, I remember it was quite scary because it was like a ghost town. But everyone was literally at home abiding by the rules. And I feel like at that point the death rate and the number of people affected did go down massively. However, after that I think a lot of people became really reckless. And that's when you know, the rules are being bended, and people were just kind of doing whatever they wanted to do. (Segment 2, Group 2)

This perception appeared to be shared by many participants across groups. Yet participants were more divided when it came to their views of those not following the rules, reflecting a key difference among segments.

5.2. Countenancing rule-breaking

Some participants were more likely to countenance some rule-breaking (Segments 1, 2 and 4), and more likely to engage in behaviour associated with higher risks themselves (Segment 1). These segments tend towards more individualist than communitarian outlooks on the pandemic, not viewing the pandemic as such a significant threat as other segments and favouring more latitude for individual judgement.

Some participants related non-adherence directly to the emergence of the more complex and changeable information environment discussed in Section 3. They saw the difficulty of following official information as providing a reason to play less attention to rules and guidelines and for individuals to make up their own mind about how to act.

This theme was evident in Segment 1:

> **P1:** I think they just changed so often that, yeah, you could never really keep up to date with it as well. And so you probably just do your own thing irrelevant of what the update was. (Segment 1, Group 1)
>
> **P4:** And that's when I kind of feel, oh I'm just kind of like I'm having to make my own assumptions with what is right and wrong with the communication because it seems to be very changeable and kind of like very contradictory. (Segment 1, Group 2)
>
> **P5:** But then, when it comes to exceptions, that's when the confusion comes in. So the people that do understand but don't see the other people understand they plead ignorance and use or abuse that exception, because they know it's easier to get away with. (Segment 1, Group 2)

The fact that official communication was perceived to be 'softer' in the 'stay alert' period after the first lockdown was significant:

> **P2:** But you know people take advice as, well they're advising, you know I can't go to work, but I'm going to go to work, and people will make their own choices. You know whether it means they're breaking the rules, perhaps. But yeah you are right, and that made it really unclear because it wasn't, it wasn't very definite. I think later on his directions became more definite; you must not do this, you cannot do that. But yeah, in the beginning it was just, you know, this is government advice, but it wasn't really. It was a soft way of telling us what we can't do. (Segment 1, Group 1)

From this perspective, government messaging seemed to invite a more individualist approach, encouraging individuals to make their own judgements and interpretations of rules and guidance.

Some participants from Segment 4 expressed concerns with the mental health impacts of compliance. They expressed sympathy towards people who took some risks and stretched rules to combat isolation. Some seemed to admit, if only tacitly, to doing this themselves:

> **P2:** I think it's hard to obey rules sometimes. You have to go like make your own decision as well. If you see friends you have to say OK fine. Can we keep your distance in order or OK? It's very, very hard. To make a choice basically, you make yourself, you wanna be safety first so you have to decide yourself, if you want to be safe or not going to be safe. You keep your distance or not keep your distance, you definitely have to decide for yourself what to do. (Segment 4, Group 1)

One participant from Segment 2 described how perceptions they are not complying with rules led to disagreements with family members who took a different view:

> **P2:** I do with my partner a bit. Yeah, but we do have a disagreement about it.
>
> **M:** What sort of thing do you disagree about?

> **P2:** Well, if I'm walking past where I work, my friend lives near there? If I walk past, I want to chat with her he says I can't even chat with her and we have an argument about that. I said, well, I'm not doing harm, I'm not going in her house and chatting but you know, we do have a few disagreements about that. You know I shouldn't be going to see my Mum and Dad, but yeah, you see he's quite strict on the rules (Segment 2, Group 1)

The perception that rules and guidance were unfair was also related to rule breaking. Previous research indicates, as noted by Niklas Steffens (2020: 42), that if people 'feel that they are disrespected or treated unfairly, they are unlikely to fall in line''. Again, the tiers system offers an example. Consider the following exchange, where participants say that 'not being heard' and being treated differently make people more likely to 'rebel' and 'not want to follow the rules':

> **P1:** Yeah, and this is where a lot of people are complaining about the North and South Divide. I've heard a lot of people saying that this week that the government doesn't care about the North. You know and the same amount of funding isn't going in. They don't care about the economy, people's well-being as much as they do for the South and the capital. [Other's nodding]
>
> **P3:** If you feel like you're not being heard, you're much more likely to rebel and not want to follow the rules.
>
> **P1:** I think that's what's happening isn't it. (Segment 4, Group 1)

The perceived hypocrisy of politicians, as discussed in Section 4, was another case of unfairness that some participants believed might undermine public compliance. One participant noted how it did not set 'a good example' to the public:

> **P5:** And they've been played as hypocrites, the majority of them, haven't they, all the way through doing things that they shouldn't be doing. So it's not like they've been setting a good example. (Mixed, Group 4)

Participants who were more accepting of people bending some rules stressed the need to consider the different circumstances individuals face. For example, two participants from Segment 1, who felt compliance was important, described that we need to be careful when judging people since their situations are different and unequal:

> **P1:** But I think we need to remember that everyone deals with this differently. And I heard a really good analogy of this in that we, yes, we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. Some people are in sturdier vessels than others. And I think that is something that we need to take into consideration. Our circumstances are not equal. (Segment 1, Group 2)
>
> **P2:** I just think everybody deals with it in their own way. And their circumstances are all different, like [Participant 1] said, and yeah, I wouldn't judge people on what they do. Like, it's not an easy time. And I think, yeah, we're just trying our best. We're all just trying to get through it. (Segment 1, Group 2)

There is an important recognition here that the ability of individuals to follow guidance and rules is unequal. Given different life situations, some members of the public are better placed to follow rules and guidance than others and this should be borne in mind when judging the actions of others. As discussed in Section 3, one reason that those who are less engaged told us they avoided official information was because their lives had been negatively affected by the pandemic.

5.3. Frustrated by rule-breaking

Where some participants were willing to countenance some rule-breaking, others were frustrated by it and felt it undermined public togetherness. These views were most common among Segments 3, 5, and 6, who tend to have a more communitarian outlook on the pandemic, viewing it as a significant threat and stressing the need for individuals and government to work collectively for the public good.

The complex, changeable information environment described in Section 3 can have different implications for those concerned about their safety and/or who are reluctant to break rules. Rather than non-compliance, it may lead to over compliance. For example, faced with information that is difficult to comprehend, some participants were resigned to not understanding the intricacies of changing rules and guidance. As one participant told us, since the official information is hard to follow, they decided to limit what they were doing to stay 'safe':

> **P1:** In the beginning, me and my friends and family discussed it all the time. What you could and couldn't do but now because their rules have been so illogical and there's been mixed messages then we just don't go out. That's it. I'll go to the supermarket, work from home on that's it and you know you're safe then. (Segment 5, Group 1)

The concern here is that people may limit their scope of action more than might be required, in effect shrinking their worlds unnecessarily.

Following rules and guidance closely themselves, several of those who valued compliance appeared frustrated with what they perceived as increasing non-compliance by others. These participants expressed some disproval of others who they thought were breaking the rules or not being responsible by, for example, not keeping the two meters distance, refusing to wear a mask, and not following other guidance properly:

> **P3:** I just think that sometimes, society doesn't take any responsibility for itself and people were just too quick to sit back and say, well, this person said I need to do this, or this person said that I would need to do that rather than thinking well, actually, this is the minimum of what I should do, and I'll do a little bit extra if I can for the greater good kind of thing. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P2:** I've had a lot of conversations about it. I think the gist of them are being in my case, a somewhat degree of irritation because certainly here in central London it's probably 60/65% of people taking it seriously and the rest aren't. (Segment 3, Group 1)
>
> **P5:** I think when people are being a bit blasé about the rules and stuff and it makes me a bit fed up because we're all trying our best and what's the point in half of us trying and the others sort of dragging us down again? (Mixed, Group 1)

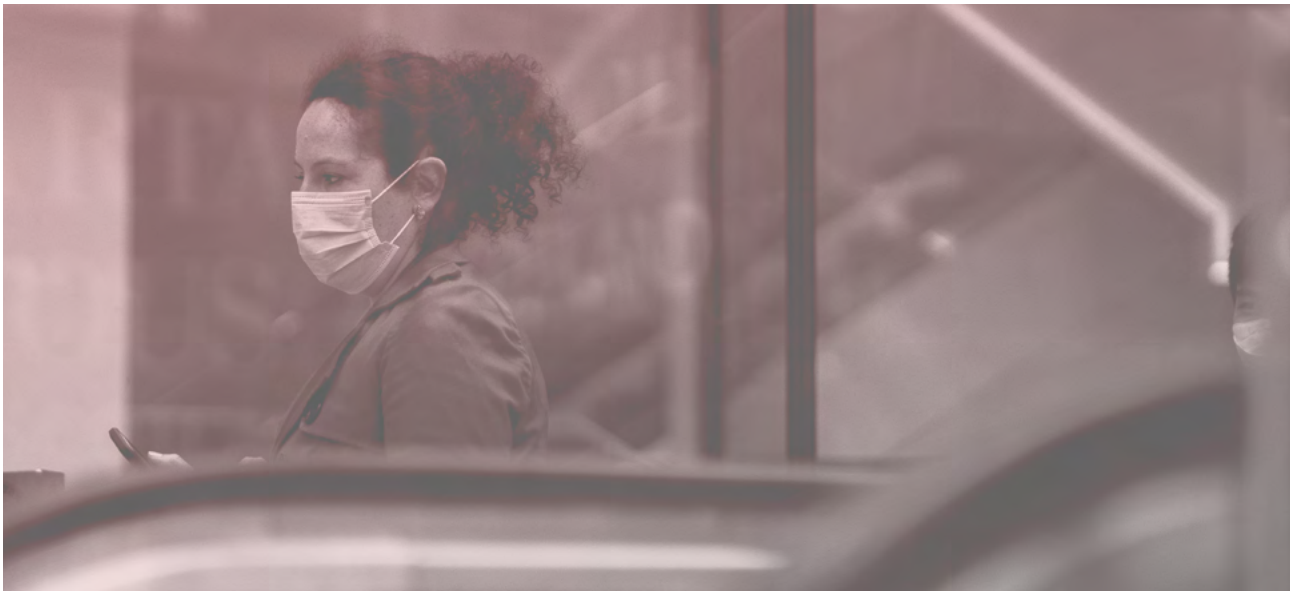
Some of these participants placed blame for what they perceived as a drop in compliance on people's individualist outlook and failure 'to do the right thing', with some singling out young people in particular:

> **P1:** The government is relying on people to do the right thing. And unfortunately there's a lot of the population that are never going to do the right thing, and are not going to follow any sort of thing, guidance they're given. That's my opinion. (Segment 5, Group 2)
>
> **P2:** I like to stick to the rules, but I do find – and I don't want to be judgemental and I don't want to come across it, but I do find a lot of the younger people do think to themselves I don't care. It's not my problem type of thing. (Segment 6, Group 1)

At the same time, reflecting the views of those who were more willing to accept non-compliance in some circumstances, there was a recognition that the government's communicative approach may have invited people to interpret rules and guidance in their own way. Rather than leave so much scope for individual judgement, they wanted communication to be firmer and less compromising:

> **P5:** I don't want to get too involved in the political aspects of this, but I think the government's general overall philosophy is very much one of, you know, not interfering, not- And I think that's really not helped to be honest with you. We could do with more of a maybe the wartime government's attitude perhaps. You know, the attitude that well yes people need to be a little bit more, you need to be clear, people need: if necessary, tell people what to do but in a good way and a nice way. (Segment 5, Group 1)

A key tension is raised here that is at the heart of responding to the pandemic effectively. The sense that some people are 'taking liberties' causes frustration. Given the need for the public to act collectively, firmer communication and enforcement to ensure adherence may appear warranted from this perspective. But exhortations to act collectively will not be effective unless accompanied by policies that promote solidarity by being fair to all and sensitive to the different circumstances of groups (Fuks et al. 2021, West-Oram 2021)'. Public togetherness can only be sustained when groups feel listened to and perceived unfairness addressed. Put differently, sustaining public togetherness means recognizing public difference.



6. Conclusion

We started this report by noting how the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant communicative challenge. Governments not only need to reach a diverse public with messages they can understand. They also need to gain public confidence and convince individuals to act for the public good, even though some may view the threats posed by the pandemic to be low and the costs of compliance to be high (Prainsack and Buyx 2011; Prainsack 2020).

Building on earlier survey research (Coleman et al., 2020), this report has presented qualitative research that assesses how well the UK government has fared in relation to this communicative challenge. Through a series of focus groups, we have explored the views and experiences of participants from six segments, each of which capture important differences in how the public have responded to official communication about the pandemic. In the process, we have identified some key issues that have hindered public understanding, confidence, and compliance.

Given the nature of the communicative challenge facing government, the types of issues identified in this report might be viewed as unavoidable. Certainly, achieving full public understanding, confidence, and compliance is not realistic. However, this does not mean that these objectives cannot be approximated more closely. Informed by literature on crisis and risk communication (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2018; Hooker and Leask 2020; Hyland-Wood et al. 2021; Jetten et al. 2020; Sanders 2020; Wardman 2020; World Health Organization 2018) and democratic theory (Bachtiger et al. 2018; Moore and MacKenzie 2020; 2020; Pearse 2020; Scheinerman and McCoy 2021; The Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2020), we outline some recommendations below. We stress the need for (1) communication to be clearer and more consistent (Section 6.1) and (2) decision-making to be more inclusive and deliberative (Section 6.2).

6.1. Clear and consistent communication

As described in Section 3, while our participants tended to agree that official information became more complex and changeable after the first lockdown period, the implications of this varied for different groups. The highly engaged were best placed to keep up with official information and most likely to feel confident in their understanding. However, not all members of the public were consistently engaged, especially after early interest in the pandemic waned. Those who were engaged in a 'monitorial' mode — keeping an eye out for information that is most relevant to them — were in danger of missing key announcements in a more complex and changeable information environment. Meanwhile, those who were disengaged were least likely to follow and understand information.

Some complexity in the information environment may be unavoidable, especially given that information will change in response to developments in the pandemic. But are there ways that official information and the information environment can be made more comprehensible? Both clarity and consistency of information (Section 6.1.1) and clarity and consistency in the way information is delivered (Section 6.1.2) are important.

6.1.1 Clarity and consistency of information

Information needs to be as clear and consistent as possible (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021). Political leaders and experts responsible for communicating information must have good knowledge and understanding, so they can communicate information accurately. Careful coordination is needed to ensure consistency of messages across channels, especially given how — to reach a diverse and sometimes disengaged public — core messages will need to be disseminated widely. Of course, news media are important for sharing public information, but leaks and pre-briefings to journalists can add to public confusion if information is inconsistent with subsequent government announcements. With the disengaged in mind, attention should be paid to the signals that changes in regulations make and how consistent they are with government messaging overall. In Section 3, we noted Reicher's (2021) point about how 'laws and regulations can't be separated from the messaging, they are the messaging'. He gives the following example: 'if you open up the pubs, allow people to go to cinemas, you see that everyday every time you pass a cinema or bar, you don't hear the statements which qualify that and say "be careful"' (Reicher 2021).

Of course, rules and guidance may change in response to developments in the pandemic, so constancy in messages over time may not be possible. When rules and guidance change, particular attention needs to be placed on explaining why, so clarity is restored and confidence retained (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021). Being transparent about the reasoning for decisions is important, while acknowledging uncertainty around developing scientific evidence can help to explain changes in guidance that might occur subsequently (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021; Moore and MacKenzie 2020). Decision makers should be open about mistakes in previous policy and what has been learnt from them (Wardman 2020). Meanwhile, the government should be clear about its policy priorities and values. Even where specific rules and guidance might change in response to developments, the priorities and values of the government should remain more stable (Hooker and Leask 2020).

6.1.2 Clarity and consistency of information delivery

Clarity and consistency in how information is conveyed is also important in promoting public understanding. To make a complex information environment navigable, the public need to know where and when to expect different types of information. As noted above, basic rules and guidance should be disseminated as widely as possible through multiple channels, trying to find the public where they are. But the public will need to be alerted to key policy announcements that explain the rationale for rules and guidance and signposted to pathways to additional information, including information tailored to the needs of specific groups. Without clear alerts and signposting, there is a danger that those who are not consistently engaged will miss this information.

The government used various methods, including Prime Ministerial addresses, briefings, websites, social media, and television adverts, to convey official information. It is important that the public has clear expectations about these information sources and communication channels, but we found that this was not always the case. As one participant explained, 'I just felt that the channels of communication were not always consistent and reliable' (Segment 1, Group 2). For example, while some briefings included important policy announcements related to the pandemic, other briefings were perceived by some participants as lacking new or relevant information or as involving too much information (e.g., lengthy presentations with data-heavy slides). The fact that messages were leaked and reported by the media in advance also devalued government announcements when they happened, since the information was known already.

As well as knowing what to expect from different information sources and channels, it would be beneficial for the public to know when key announcements may happen. The Government 'roadmap out of lockdown' introduced in 2021 made it clear when key decision and announcements about changing rules and guidance were likely to be made. Similar clarity was lacking during the period when our research was conducted.

6.2. More deliberative communication

Clear and consistent communication is important, but it will not secure public confidence and compliance alone. As described in Section 4, some members of the public lacked confidence in government decision-making, while others were not convinced by the scientific evidence used. Meanwhile, as noted in Section 5, some participants were more willing to countenance non-compliance than others, tending to hold more individualist views and stressing the need to consider the different circumstances of individuals and address unfairness in rules and guidance.

Given the uncertain nature of scientific evidence and the conflicting values and interests at stake, achieving full confidence in how the government has handled the pandemic is clearly difficult. Likewise, public compliance is challenging where the threats of the virus and the costs of compliance are not shared equally (Prainsack and Buyx 2011; Prainsack 2020). However, we argue below that public confidence and compliance could be enhanced by a more inclusive and deliberative approach to decision-making, both through consultation with representatives and scientific experts (Section 6.2.1) and engaging the public directly (Section 6.2.2) (Bachtiger et al. 2018; Moore and MacKenzie 2020; Pearse 2020; The Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2020). Ensuring that a wider range of views and experiences are consulted would build confidence in decision-making processes. Likewise, it should help to sustain the 'public togetherness' required to ensure compliance. No matter how many times political leaders encourage the public to think collectively (Boris Johnson said 'there really is such a thing as society' during the first lockdown, evoking in order to counter a famous phrase by Margaret Thatcher), such appeals will not be effective in the long term unless backed up by policies that support solidarity by being fair and sensitive to the different circumstance of groups (Fuks et al. 2021, West-Oam 2021). Public togetherness can only be sustained when all groups feel acknowledged and perceived unfairness is addressed.

6.2.1. Consultation with representatives and experts

To promote both confidence in government and compliance with rules and guidance, the public must have faith in decision-making processes. As one participant put it, there needs to be 'buy in' from the public in terms of how decisions are made:

> **P1:** What it seems to me should probably matter more is trying to get more of the buy in from the population at large in terms of the decision-making and how you're making those decisions. (Segment 3, Group 1)

With this in mind, some participants would have liked to have seen a government of national unity, where different politicians, from opposition political parties as well as the government, work together to address a crisis in the national interest:

> **P2:** It's a shame the way that politics are in this country. If we could have actually had a government of national unity in such a crisis then that might have made things a lot more effective. (Segment 3, Group 1)

> **P1:** So, I think that there's also an element, to me personally, where a national government would make a difference or should make a difference in the sense that you would expect it to be able to weigh all the different counter arguments more objectively than either a Labour government or Conservative government. (Segment 3, Group 1)

Even if a unity government may not be possible in practice, public confidence would be developed if government consulted as widely as possible in arriving at decisions, engaging different political and community representatives at a local and national level. Likewise, wider consultation with different scientific opinions beyond key advisors can build confidence in scientific judgments (see Cairney, 2021 and Moore and MacKenzie, 2020 on the relationship between government and scientific advice). More consultation does not mean consensus will result. Forceful debate is to be expected given the different and sometimes conflicting values and interests at stake. The aim must be to ensure the debate is conducted as constructively as possible, groups feel listened to and valued in the process, and to achieve a fair compromise among positions where consensus is not possible (Habermas 1997, 166). Deliberative consultation would not only help to build more public confidence in decisions. It also models the public togetherness at a political level that underpins compliance at a societal level.

6.2.2. Public engagement

As well as wide consultation with representatives and experts, opportunities for the public to participate and share their views and experiences directly are important. As noted in Section 4, some participants wanted an opportunity to ask more questions about the scientific evidence. Meanwhile, others did not feel like their situations were properly reflected in decisions. As suggested in Section 5, the fact that individual circumstances are not recognized adequately by policy and perceived unfairness not addressed may be related to non-compliance.

One participant described how the Government's communication appeared to be 'very much on their terms', and that this caused them to disengage:

> **P1:** It's just been very much on their terms. They just, you know, a conference is held, they go up, they stand, they speak. We come out, already we know what they're going to say or there's a good rumour of what they're going to say. And they say it and then leave. And that's it. Okay, what do we do now? So, I don't, I mean that's why I obviously started to switch off. Because it was just, you know, you couldn't help not hear the messages. But it was just sort of, oh we're going to say this and they came and said it. And then they go again. (Segment 5, Group 2)

Likewise, another participant felt there was a 'big divide' between the public and decision-makers. They called for efforts to be made 'to get more people involved at a local level and a regional level':

> **P4:** I think that there needs to be perhaps an overall look at the way government politics in general function. Because there does seem to be a big divide. And I don't think it helps when people, to be honest with you, try and cover stuff up and mistakes up. And I think this applies to all politicians to be honest. But there is, there was, and certainly probably is still a feeling that maybe parliament doesn't serve the interests of the people properly. And I think, and that politics is something that people sort of, you know, think is a subject to be avoided.

> So I think we need some kind of reframing of the system so that we get more people involved at a local level and a regional level perhaps. I don't know how you do that. But better communication definitely, and more honest and open communication. (Segment 5, Group 2)

Members of the public have been able to ask political leaders and experts questions at times during the pandemic. Some participants valued such public engagement, with one explaining that listening to other members of the public helped them to understand people's different experiences:

> **P4:** And I think, you know, the press conferences gives the opportunity for the press and the general public to ask questions. I almost found that I wanted more of that because I wanted to actually understand, you know, how other people are impacted and affected. So actually listening to other people, giving them the opportunity to say, you know, these are the potential things we need to think about going forward, would be useful. (Mixed, Group 3)

Opportunities for members of the public to interact with political leaders and experts could be extended, especially through the use of digital media (Kim and Kreps 2020). There are also well-established methods of deliberative public engagement, such as citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies, where groups of individuals can be brought together to reflect on common issues and feed into decision making (Pearse 2020; Smith and Setälä 2018; Scheinerman and McCoy 2021). At the same time, government should listen out for the informal deliberation that emerges more spontaneously in the public sphere, identifying specific issues and groups to engage with further (Habermas, 1997; Scheinerman and McCoy, 2021). Achieving meaningful public engagement is not easy. However, bridging the gap between the public and decision-makers is necessary to promote public confidence and sustain the public togetherness that supports compliance.

Appendix 1:

Focus group discussion guide

Context/background

- How well has the Government responded to the pandemic in your view?
- What do you think the priorities of the Government have been during this time?
  - *Prompts: public health, the economy, individual freedom, mental health, loneliness)*
- Do you agree with these priorities?

Information: Engaging and understanding

- Have you kept up with official guidance during the pandemic? Why? Why not?
  - *Prompts: sources, channels*
- Have messages about the pandemic been easy or difficult to understand? Why?
- Have you discussed the pandemic with others?
  - *Prompts: friends, family, acquaintances, neighbours and colleagues*
- Do you disagree with others? Have you changed your views or changed other people's views?

Communication: Evaluation

- Ask group to comment on a short video clip of Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and one of Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, communicating information about the pandemic
  - *Prompts: style and content*
- Thinking about the pandemic overall, has well has the government communicated?
- How could official communication of the pandemic be improved in your view?

Longer-term expectations

- What are your longer-term expectations about the future following the pandemic? Will society change or return to normal?
- What can be done about this?
- This research is about communication – thinking about the future, what role does communication need to play? How do you think government or we as a society should communicate?

Appendix 2:

List of focus groups

Focus group	Date	Participants
Focus Group 1	19 November 2020	2
Focus Group 2	23 November 2020	2
Focus Group 3	24 November 2020	5
Focus Group 4	26 November 2020	4
Focus Group 5	30 November 2020	8
Focus Group 6	1 December 2020	5
Focus Group 7	2 December 2020	3
Focus Group 8	9 December 2020	5
Focus Group 9	10 December 2020	4
Focus Group 10	14 December 2020	5
Focus Group 11	17 December 2020	3
Focus Group 12	11 January 2021	5
Focus Group 13	12 January 2021	6
Focus Group 14	18 January 2021	5
Focus Group 15	19 January 2021	6
Focus Group 16	25 January 2021	4

Appendix 3:

Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic characteristic group		Total
Gender	Male	30
	Female	42
Age	18-24	3
	25-34	11
	35-44	11
	45-54	19
	55-64	19
	65+	9
Ethnicity	English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	60
	Irish	1
	White and Asian	1
	White and Black African and Caribbean	4
	Indian/Bangladeshi	3
	Chinese	1
	Prefer not to say	2
SES	ABC1	46
	C2DE	26
Employment status	Currently furloughed	3
	Not working but seeking work or temporarily unemployed or sick	6
	Reduced hours/employers imposed temporary leave of absence because of COVID-19	5
	Retired	7
	Self-employed: Working between 8 and 29 hours per week	3
	Self-employed: Working 30 hours per week or more	3
	Working full time: Working 30 hours per week or more	25
	Working part time: Working between 8 and 29 hours per week	17
	Not working and not seeking work	3
Geographical location	London	7
	East Midlands	5
	Eastern	4
	North-East	4
	North-West	14
	Northern Ireland	1
	Scotland	3
	South-East	9
	West Midlands	8
	Yorkshire & Humberside	8
	South-West	7
	Wales	2

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