

Develop and refine your communications strategy

A communications strategy will underpin your overall policy engagement strategy. It does not have to be complicated, but should be something that has support from the team, programme or organisation, and ideally should be as practical as possible. It should not be too rigid and will need regular review to ensure it aligns with overall policy engagement activities. Most of all, it needs to be relevant to your context.

As you consider each stage, you can document key issues/notes in the template in Table 4.⁸

Table 4: Communications strategy template

Stage	Action
Policy objective and intended outcomes	Set out your policy-influencing objective, as in the main strategy, and the outcomes you are seeking.
Stakeholders	Identify and prioritise key audiences. Having already completed stakeholder mapping, this can be straightforward. If you have too many stakeholders this may need further prioritising. Produce a stakeholder map specifically for the communications strategy.
Key actions	Undertake linear research communications (e.g. packaging materials and presenting to media houses). Facilitate debate through events and roundtables. Develop capacity among audiences to use knowledge more effectively.
Messaging (not always clear in complex settings)	Develop your overall messages and sub-messages for each audience group. It may be difficult to do this initially; it can be refined over time.
Channels, tools and activities	If the first four sections are clearly identified then the rest of the strategy will fall easily into place. Decide on main channels for each audience group and, subsequently, relevant tools and activities. Be general initially if necessary, but more specific and realistic over time.
Resources	Good communications does not necessarily need a large budget, but it is essential not to underestimate the time and effort required. You may need to think about this sooner in the strategy. Use free online tools to share your communications rather than developing a website from scratch. But a dedicated person will still need to work on this.
Timescales	Always deliver what you promise and never over-promise. Create a calendar to share with your team. Assign a team member to ensure activities are delivered on time.
Evaluation and amendment	Setting aside time to assess the impact of your strategy is critical, though not necessarily complicated. Use online tools such as Google Analytics, coordinate short review meetings or create an impact log. This should align with what you decide more widely for your policy engagement strategy. Discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

8. Hovland (2005) and Economic and Social Research Council Impact Toolkit 2012: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/impact-toolkit/index.aspx>