



National Audit Office

Report

by the Comptroller
and Auditor General

Cabinet Office

EU Exit: the Get ready for Brexit campaign

Key facts

£100m	£53m	£46m
the budget for the Get ready for Brexit communications campaign (August 2019 to March 2020)	planned campaign expenditure to end of October 2019	actual campaign expenditure to end of October 2019

1 September 2019	the launch date of the Get ready for Brexit campaign
28 October 2019	the date the campaign was stopped following agreement to extend UK membership of the EU to 31 January 2020
6 weeks	the time taken to design and develop the communication campaign, between the appointment of the new Prime Minister and the campaign launch on 1 September
34%	the percentage of UK citizens, based on a weekly survey, who have looked or have started to look for information, at the time the campaign was stopped, broadly unchanged from the beginning of the campaign
73%	the percentage of people that recalled the campaign when shown an advert, based on a weekly survey

Summary

Introduction

- 1** Following the result of the EU membership referendum in June 2016 the government asked departments to begin preparing for all eventualities, including a 'no-deal' exit from the EU. The government's objective was to provide stability for citizens, consumers and businesses, to ensure the smooth operation of business, infrastructure and public services and to minimise any disruption to the economy.
- 2** The work undertaken by departments identified, for example, issues that might impact on the flow of people and goods across the border with the EU and the rights of UK citizens within the EU and EU citizens in the UK. While departments made preparations, putting in place legislation and developing new systems and processes, it became clear that delivering a smooth transition would also depend on businesses and citizens being ready for any changes that might take place. Departments identified a range of issues where the public would need information to enable them to prepare.
- 3** On 1 September 2019 the government launched the Get ready for Brexit public information campaign (the campaign). The campaign objective was to ensure that everyone was prepared for leaving the EU on 31 October – regardless of the negotiation outcome. The campaign also took place at a time when the new administration was seeking to renegotiate the terms of the UK's withdrawal agreement with the EU. The campaign was stopped on 28 October when the government and EU agreed an extension to the UK's membership of the EU to 31 January 2020. The UK and EU have since agreed a deal and the UK will leave the EU on 31 January 2020.
- 4** The campaign comprised two main components: termed the 'air' and 'ground' campaigns.

 - **Air campaign** – The air campaign was targeted at all UK residents, UK citizens in the EU, businesses crossing the border, EU citizens living in the UK and recipients of EU funds and was intended to raise awareness of the UK's commitment to leaving the EU on 31 October 2019, and to encourage people to use the information on the GOV.UK website to identify the steps they might need to take to prepare. It included advertising through TV, radio, digital and other outlets.
 - **Ground campaign** – The objective of the ground campaign was to build on the air campaign by providing information to targeted groups to encourage them to take action in 26 priority areas, for example hauliers moving goods between the EU and UK. It included non-digital activity such as roadshows and stakeholder events.

5 The overall campaign was led by the Cabinet Office. The executive director of government communications, a senior civil servant at the Cabinet Office, was the senior responsible owner. He was supported by the Brexit Communication Centre, a team of civil servants from the Cabinet Office, the Department for Exiting the European Union and other departments. Directors of communications working in other government departments reported to the Cabinet Office on delivery of the elements of the ground campaign led by their departments. The Cabinet Office appointed three agencies – Engine, Wavemaker and Manning Gottlieb OMD – to design the campaign messages and creative assets, such as billboard posters; decide which media to buy to reach the target groups; and buy the media spots. For the air campaign, the Cabinet Office contracted Ebiquity to provide assurance on whether the campaign was cost-effective. The Cabinet Office established an EU Exit Campaign Assurance Panel, chaired by a non-executive director of the Cabinet Office and industry expert, to provide peer review to the campaign.

6 The overall campaign budget was £100 million, including £57 million for the air campaign, £26 million for the ground campaign and a further £17 million for activity to support both campaigns (which included £3 million for central staffing and £11 million for developing GOV.UK). By the end of October, at the point at which the campaign was stopped, £46 million had been spent against an expected spend of £53 million by that point. The Cabinet Office has informed us that of the £46 million, £2 million had been committed on media space beyond the end of October. The Cabinet Office has informed us that this media space can be used by it or other government departments by the end of 2020.

7 This report has been prepared following Parliamentary interest in the campaign. It examines the management of the campaign, in particular: the preparation of the campaign, including the approval of the business case and budget, and procurement; governance and oversight; and the evidence available to the Cabinet Office on the effectiveness of the campaign. We did not examine the timeliness, completeness and quality of the messages delivered and whether they were helpful to their target audiences. Further details on the evidence we reviewed and our methodology is covered in Appendix One. We have commented in other reports on the need for government communication with businesses and others to support the UK's preparations for leaving the EU.¹

¹ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Exiting the EU: supplying the health and social care sectors*, Session 2017–2019, HC 2654, National Audit Office, September 2019.

Key findings

8 The Cabinet Office's need to communicate multiple messages to multiple audiences, in the midst of great political uncertainty, made this a complex campaign to deliver. As well as raising awareness among UK citizens in the UK, the campaign sought to target UK citizens living in the EU, EU nationals living in the UK, businesses in both the UK and EU and organisations in receipt of EU funds. To prepare for EU Exit, departments had identified more than 300 workstreams that needed to be taken forward. The Cabinet Office, working with departments, had identified from these the 26 highest priority actions to be communicated to citizens and businesses, of which 15 were included in plans for the ground campaign. In addition, it had to remain responsive to changing political events, for example reducing expenditure on the campaign on 17 October when it thought the risk of no-deal had subsided following the announcement of a proposed deal by the UK government and EU (paragraphs 1.6 to 1.12, 3.3 and Figures 2, 3 and 8).

9 The Cabinet Office worked closely with departments' communications teams to create a single cross-government campaign. The Cabinet Office had identified lessons from the campaign it had run in the period up to 29 March 2019, the initial planned date for the UK to leave the EU. This time, the government decided that all EU Exit communications by departments should take place within an overall coordinated campaign. This required close working across departments, including regular meetings with the Cabinet Office team of representatives from all departments. The Cabinet Office considered this resulted in better, faster decision-making and more integrated messages. The ground campaign, for example, involved elements delivered by teams located in 15 departments. The campaign integrated the messages to the target audiences to reduce the risk that individuals were receiving multiple messages from different departments (paragraphs 1.13, 1.19, 2.6, 2.7 and 2.12 to 2.18).

10 The Cabinet Office began intensive preparation for the overall campaign in July 2019 following the appointment of a new administration. The Cabinet Office had reviewed the lessons to be learned from the March campaign in April and May 2019. By July 2019 a number of departments were reporting an urgent need to communicate with target audiences about the action they might need to take ahead of 31 October 2019. Officials prepared options for a campaign during the last week of July, including the option for a campaign on a significantly larger and more intensive scale than that run ahead of 29 March. On 31 July 2019 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced new funding for no-deal preparations, which included £100 million for a communications campaign. Usually government information campaigns are planned over many months, for example, the Cabinet Office's own guidance expects government TV campaigns to be worked-up five months before launch. The Cabinet Office had to assemble a team quickly, drawing staff from a range of departments, and appoint contractors to help design, develop and deliver the campaign. The air campaign was launched within six weeks of the start of the planning stage (paragraphs 1.6, 2.2, 2.7 to 2.10).

11 For its chosen option, the Cabinet Office business case did not demonstrate increased impact for the proposed spending on the air campaign compared to lower-cost alternatives. The business case analysed four options ranging from 'do nothing' to three options of increasing scale up to the preferred option with a budget of up to £100 million. The £100 million option, which included up to £60 million to be spent on an air campaign, had the potential to reach 99.9% of the UK population, on average 65 times. Only the £100 million option included spending on an extensive ground campaign. The majority of the preferred £100 million option was allocated to the Cabinet Office-run air campaign. It identified in the business case that it was the 'on-the-ground activity' that would get people to act. The business case did not attempt to quantify the potential impact of increased spending on the air campaign in prompting public action and therefore did not assess the additional value to be derived (paragraphs 2.17, 2.18 and Figure 9).

12 The three principal contractors – Engine, Wavemaker and Manning Gottlieb OMD – were drawn from existing government framework agreements. All three companies had previously competed successfully to be added to the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) framework agreements for government communications contracts. The Cabinet Office appointed two of them – Engine and Wavemaker – off existing call-off contracts. The third, Manning Gottlieb OMD, was appointed, following competition, the sole media buyer for government in May 2018 and as such there was no requirement to run a further competition. For the air campaign, the Cabinet Office contracted Ebiquity to provide independent challenge on both the media strategy (developed by Wavemaker) and the media buying plans (generated by Manning Gottlieb OMD) to provide assurance that the campaign was cost-effective (paragraphs 2.20 to 2.23, 3.15 and Figures 10 and 11).

13 The Cabinet Office gathered a lot of performance information but lacked a consistent way of measuring impact during the initial period of the campaign, which made it difficult to track the value delivered. The Cabinet Office reported on a wide variety of performance data in its internal reports to senior officials and ministers but there was little consistency in what was being reported during the first month or so of the campaign, though its choice of measures became more consistent thereafter. The performance measure agreed by the Cabinet Office with the EU Exit Assurance Panel – the proportion of UK citizens who have looked or have started to look for information – was not confirmed until mid-October and a target was not set. The Cabinet Office had a clear target level of action for two out of the 26 priority actions that departments wanted citizens and businesses to take. It gathered performance information about the level of action for some but not all of the 26 areas (paragraphs 2.15, 3.6 to 3.12 and Figure 8).

14 The Cabinet Office's air campaign, based on survey evidence, achieved widespread public recognition but evidence of impact was mixed. By the end of October 2019, the Cabinet Office had spent £28 million on the air campaign against a forecast of £36 million for the same period. It estimates that by the end of October 2019, the air campaign had reached 99.8% of the population and that each member of the public had had the opportunity to see the adverts 55 times. Cabinet Office commissioned survey data show that 58% of people could recall the campaign and 73% recalled it when shown an advert. However, the Cabinet Office performance indicator agreed with the EU Exit Assurance Panel, the proportion of UK citizens who reported that they have looked or have started to look for information, did not notably change compared to the beginning of the campaign: it ranged between 32% and 37% and was 34% when the campaign was stopped. The detailed performance data reported by the Cabinet Office did show action being taken on some of the priority areas. For example, the number of passport renewal applications were higher than business-as-usual forecasts and the number of international driving permits issued increased during the period of the campaign though the reporting did not assess this against what was likely to be needed (paragraphs 3.2, 3.4, 3.9, 3.11 and 3.12, Figures 15 and 17).

15 The Cabinet Office's review of elements of the ground campaign recorded a positive response from target audiences although it was more difficult to determine the impact on preparedness. By the end of October 2019, departments had spent £14 million on the ground campaign in line with its forecast for the same period. The Cabinet Office told us that it had carried out seven deep-dive reviews on activities run by departments before the campaign was stopped. The five deep-dives we reviewed focused on the activity delivered and stakeholder experience. The reviews recorded a positive response from the target audiences although, in most instances, it was not clear whether this led on to action being taken. Examples of some of the ground activity and audience response were:

- 22,194 visits to GOV.UK by UK nationals in the EU directly from SMS messaging after the Department for Work & Pensions sent SMS messages to recipients of UK state pension in the EU; and
- 120 organisations attended a HM Revenue & Customs conference designed to increase Brexit readiness. All attendees completing a follow-up survey said they would be passing on the information provided to their members and/or customers (paragraphs 3.5 and 3.14, Figures 12 and 14).

Conclusion

16 The Cabinet Office had to work at great pace to prepare and launch a large, complex campaign spanning the work of many departments. It established a dedicated team to coordinate and work closely with departments to integrate messages from across government, getting them to work together effectively to coordinate what needed to be communicated to their respective target audiences.

17 As a result of the campaign the public was more aware of some of the things they might need to take action on. However, the Cabinet Office could not demonstrate that the air campaign resulted in significantly better preparedness. The impact of the campaign is likely to have been reduced by the public's reading of political events in the weeks leading up to 31 October and the likelihood of a no-deal exit. For the future, the Cabinet Office's analysis of campaign options should, from the start, focus much more on what impact is needed and how the behaviour change required by government will be delivered. Its scrutiny of plans should place more emphasis on targeting resources on the combination of activities likely to add the greatest value. A more consistent focus on key performance metrics from an early stage would help maintain attention on objectives.