



The Public Sector Approach to Digital Engagement 2021



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A note from Jack Fox, Public Sector Lead at Orlo

It's hard to exaggerate the impact that Covid-19 has had on digital engagement. The world as we knew it changed in what felt like the blink of an eye, crisis communication strategies faced the ultimate stress test and many organisations were forced to execute on their digital transformation strategies almost overnight.

Research shows that global social media users increased to almost 4.2 billion at the start of this year. With digital channels the preferred method of contact for many, the pressure for Public Sector bodies to deliver time and cost efficient comms has never been greater.

To understand the impact the pandemic has had and explore what 2021 holds, Orlo joined forces with Microsoft and comms2point0 to survey over 200 comms professionals from local and central government, healthcare, education, blue light and beyond. What follows are the results - we hope you'll find this report useful as you benchmark how you're doing compared to others in your sector, helping you to plan your digital engagement strategies to get the most out of 2021.



A note from Darren Caveney, Creator of Comms2point0

Working with comms teams around the UK these past 12 months it was very clear that demand pressures saw them working increased hours dealing with Covid-19 on top of their planned work. Anecdotally, I have heard of individuals in teams regularly working 50-60 hour weeks through the pandemic.

What this research confirms is that demand did indeed go up substantially across all parts of the public sector. Already busy teams have been stretched like never before. Their digital channels and activity have been vital in helping, informing the public and offering engagement opportunities. This was especially important with some of the mis-information doing the rounds on Covid, vaccinations and social distancing.

This report highlights the increases in inbound across social media, email and telephone. Teams stepped up and delivered despite these demand pressures and the longevity of the pandemic.

Public sector comms teams can be proud of their hard work and achievement in 2020 but 2021 shows no sign of letting up so future-proofing, investment in digital and a fresh focus on mental health and wellbeing should be priorities for all organisations.



Crisis Comms and Covid-19 - Just how prepared were we?

Unprecedented, unthinkable, down right shocking - no words seem to do justice to the impact the pandemic has had. Though the exact circumstances may have been unpredictable we knew that many teams would have a crisis comms plan in their kit bag just in case the worst should happen. So, with the benefit of hindsight, we wanted to understand who was thanking their former selves for their foresight and who was left wanting.



First up was **Local government**, **77%** of people in this group reported having a documented and rehearsed crisis comms plan in place before the pandemic took hold. However, just **27%** of these teams found their plan to be up to the job of handling the crisis. **18%** needed to make tweaks as the crisis unfolded, whilst the remaining **55%** had to rethink their entire strategy.



Next came **Central Government** where **100%** of respondents confirmed they had a prepared crisis comms plan in place. But as events unfolded, every single one reported that they had to rethink their entire strategy.



In contrast, while only **50%** of **Healthcare** professionals had a documented and rehearsed comms plan in place, **100%** of those that did reported they found their plan to be fit for purpose.



54% of respondents in the **Education** sector confirmed they had a rehearsed crisis plan, but only **29%** of those found it to be up to the job. **64%** had to rethink their entire strategy, whilst **7%** fell somewhere in the middle.



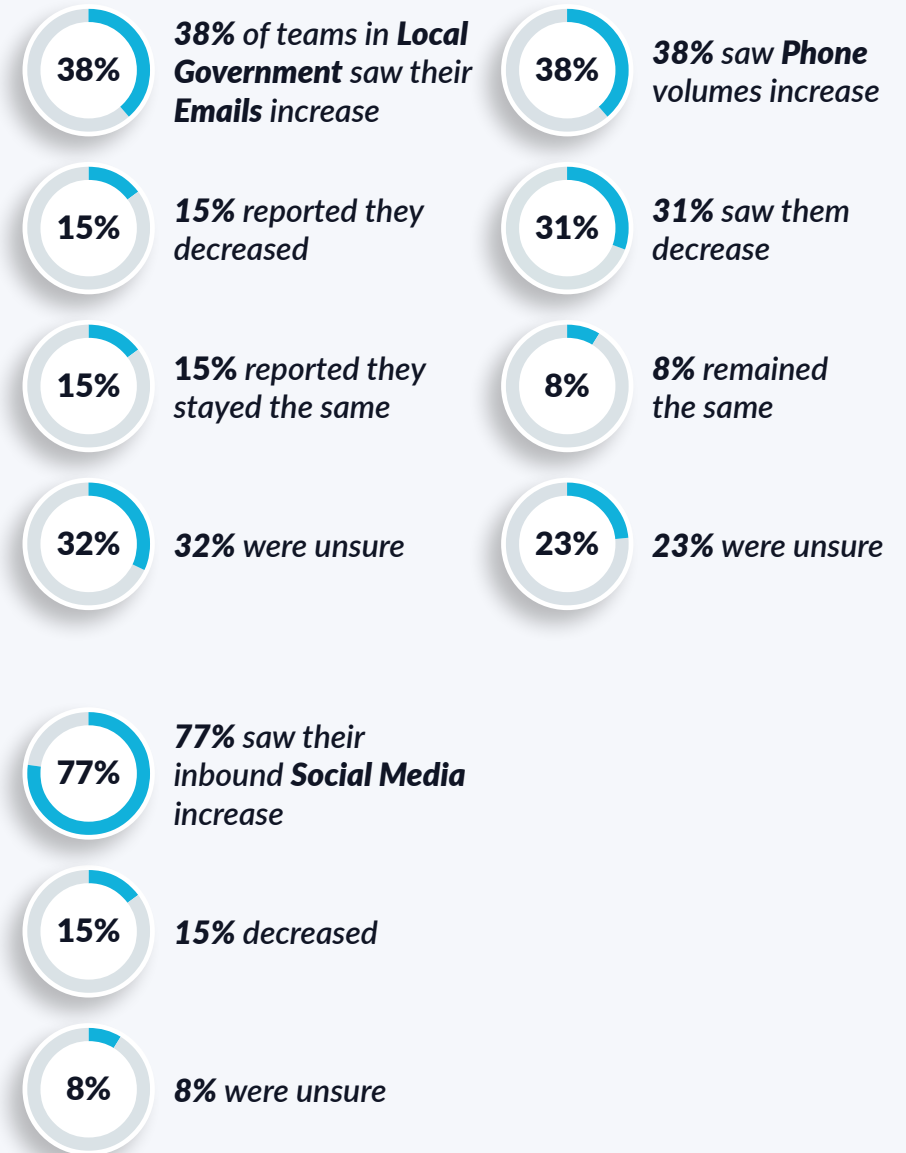
Maybe unsurprisingly, **100%** of people in **Police & Blue Lights** told us they had prepared for an emergency but while **50%** found their plan stood up well to the impact of Covid-19, the remaining **50%** felt they needed to tweak and edit as the pandemic unfolded.



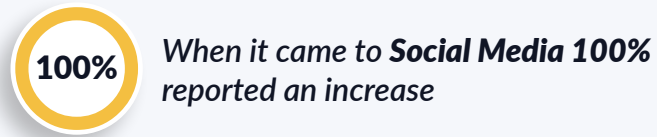
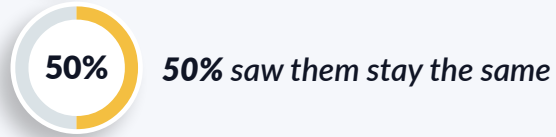
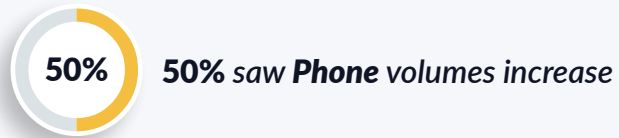
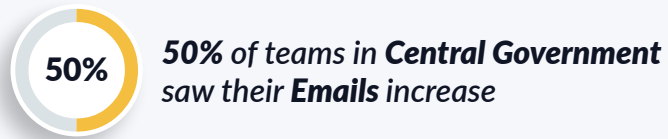
How have volumes of inbound inquiries changed in the last year?

With the uncertainty that Covid-19 brought with it, many in the Public Sector have found themselves facing more inbound citizen inquiries than ever before. We wanted to understand how that differed across the sector and when it came to getting in touch, which channels the general public were favouring.

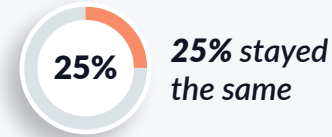
Local Government



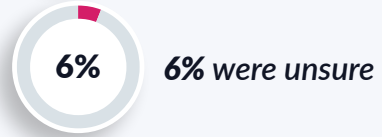
Central Government



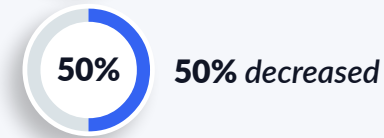
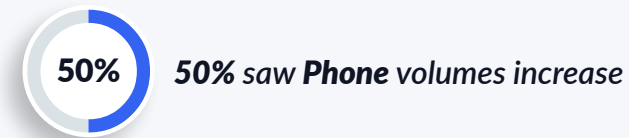
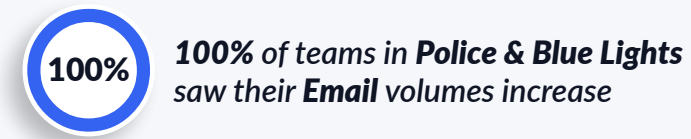
Healthcare

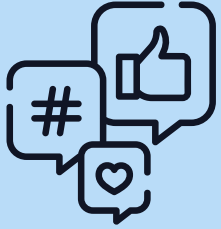


Education



Police & Blue Lights





Which Social Media channels were most popular and do they differ?

Our results show that volumes of inbound Social Media contact increased overwhelmingly across the board, so we wanted to dig a little deeper to understand which channels citizens were favouring across the sector.

Local Government

- 1 Facebook
- 2 Twitter
- 3 Instagram
- 4 LinkedIn
- 5 Nextdoor

Central Government

- 1 Twitter
- 2 Facebook
- 3 Instagram
- 4 LinkedIn
- 5 YouTube

Healthcare

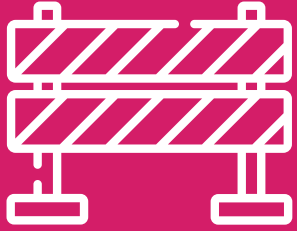
- 1 Facebook
- 2 Twitter
- 3 Instagram
- 4 LinkedIn
- 5 YouTube

Education

- 1 Instagram
- 2 Facebook
- 3 Twitter

Police & Blue Lights

- 1 Facebook
- 2 Instagram
- 3 Twitter



Barriers to Digital Maturity

Next, we wanted to understand what challenges Public Sector professionals were facing when it came to achieving the elusive status of Digital Maturity. The most prominent challenges by discipline areas are outlined here.

Local Government

- 1 Lack of funding
- 2 Lack of strategy
- 3 Lack of resource
- 4 Unwillingness or fear of change

Central Government

- 1 Lack of funding
- 2 Lack of resource
- 3 Lack of agility
- 4 Unwillingness or fear of change

Healthcare

- 1 Lack of funding
- 2 Lack of resource
- 3 Fear of change
- 4 Lack of leadership
- 5 Lack of understanding

Education

- 1 Lack of funding
- 2 Security concerns
- 3 Unwillingness or fear of change

Police & Blue Lights

- 1 Security concerns
- 2 Lack of technical skills

Your Learnings from 2020

"Social Media was vital to communicate with residents both inbound and outbound. It was an essential tool and will continue to grow."

"People want trusted information from a trusted source, in a world of 'fake news'."



"Social Media is a double-edge sword when it comes to local government communications. It's incredibly powerful to share important messages instantly, however residents limit their contact with government pages and thus receive their messages from elsewhere."

"It's vital that we are available to our citizens on the channels which they want."

"Amazing way to reach our customers. It made a real difference to give the Council a personality which we achieved through Social Media."

"That we do not invest enough in social media as a channel. It's part of someone's role - we don't even have a dedicated officer working on it full-time."

"The importance of authenticity, quick action in response to misinformation (e.g. vaccines), the merits of collaboration with partners to share messages more widely."

"Social media is not only a useful tool to engage with the public but also our staff."

"There was a huge increase in demand, but we just don't have the funds and resources to keep up with that demand. We know we could be doing more, we just aren't able to right now and it's a shame."

"We need to adapt content. Monitor and respond to rapidly changing attitudes."



"We can engage with customers through social media to great effect than traditional face to face engagement - saving money, reaching larger audiences and working more productively."

"Our customers appreciate the swift response / engagements via social media platforms."

"We need to be timely and relevant."

Priorities for 2021

"On board a wider team to deal with customers service queries."

"Develop our digital strategy."

"Trying to do more on different platforms - those that are used by our residents."

"To increase engagement across all platforms, more closely define our strategy for each platform and make social media more integrated into the way we work as an organisation."

"Shift our social media content to become more human orientated which is a proven way to increase positive engagement."



"Gather momentum again and increase engagement."

"More aligned strategy for social media so we're consistent."

"Maintain a platform that makes it easy for customers to communicate with us."

"Bring in a system that aligns the comms and social media with the customer service enquiry centre."

"Understanding where our audiences are in relation to the pandemic and their own recovery journeys."

"Hiring more staff with better digital engagement skills."

"Recruiting younger members to use modern tech better."

"Reach new audiences, engage with a wider range of our population (e.g. we know most of our followers are women in a certain age bracket)."

"Creating a policy and social media strategy to gain consistent engagement."

"Improving internal processes and efficiency in resolving/cascading cases/enquiries by encouraging cross department collaborations."

"Engage more new customers. Provide new and more interactive content and give more opportunities for customers to engage and interact."

"Digital contact maturity, webchat and reporting crime via social."

"Helping people to self serve."



Key Takeaways



Social Media is more popular than ever before

While it's probably no surprise that inbound communications have increased over the past year, social media was the one channel that universally grew in popularity across the board. Those looking to future proof their comms strategy should have their digital engagement strategy, particularly with regards to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, front and centre.



True digital maturity requires investment

Budget came top across the sector when it came to identifying barriers for digital maturity, closely followed by lack of resource but those who have been able to respond to the increase in demand have been reaping the rewards. The benefits don't all have to lie with citizens either, consider using the power of social to engage your own teams too.



Agility trumps careful planning

In many cases crisis comms plans were in place ahead of the pandemic but it's clear that the impact and scale of Covid-19 meant that in the majority of cases they needed to be rewritten. Social media is the ideal forum for sharing information quickly in rapidly changing situations. Instead of trying to preempt the unpredictable strive for authenticity, adaptability and a consistent approach to build credibility and establish yourselves as a trusted authority.





One Platform to manage Digital conversations with your citizens

The Orlo platform helps to streamline processes, improve operational efficiency and reduce costs by enabling you to use one simple platform to engage and connect with citizens. Whether the Comms team are scheduling an upcoming campaign using the Content Calendar, or the Customer Service team are working from the Unified Inbox to identify and respond to all the important inbound messages, the Orlo platform makes things easier, with a full audit trail to boot!

Interested in learning more about how we could help you? There's always a member of Team Orlo who's happy to have a chat, answer any questions and welcome you to the Orlo herd!



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