
The Independent SAGE Report 22

UK government messaging and its association with public understanding and adherence to COVID-19 mitigations:

Five principles and recommendations for a COVID communication reset

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public understanding and adherence to COVID-19 mitigations:**

Five principles and recommendations for a COVID communication reset

1. Summary

The UK is currently experiencing a second wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and England began a second national lockdown on November 5th 2020. Independent SAGE’s “Emergency [six-week plan](#) for England in response to rising cases, hospitalisations and deaths” (October 16th), urged the UK government to **reset its communication strategy** in order to bring the clarity required for people to understand precisely what to do. **Precise messaging** is more readily understood which, in turn, enables adherence and consistent behavioural enactment. **Imprecise, inconsistent, contradictory, untimely, or vague messaging**, by contrast, can lead to mistakes, perceived inequities, frustration, and non-adherence. This report charts the associations between UK government messaging and public understanding of, support for, and adherence to COVID-19 law, rules, guidance, and mitigations **between March and October 2020** (e.g., from “Stay Home” to “Stay Alert” and beyond). We present five recommendations to achieve the communication reset needed.

2. Five principles for an effective COVID-19 lexicon

Based on our analysis of COVID-19 messaging and its effects on public understanding and adherence, summarized in the **infographic** overleaf, we present five principles for effective COVID-19 messaging. These principles underpin recommendations for a COVID lexicon, outlined later in this report.

1. Messaging never merely provides factual information – communication unavoidably conveys many assumptions (the subtext, indirect meanings, inferences, and implications).
2. Messaging should be lexically and grammatically precise and thus easy to enact and adhere to.
3. Messaging should be ‘irony-resistant’.
4. ‘Branding’ or sloganeering should not come at the expense of clarity and precision.
5. Messaging should be underpinned by evidence about what is effective.

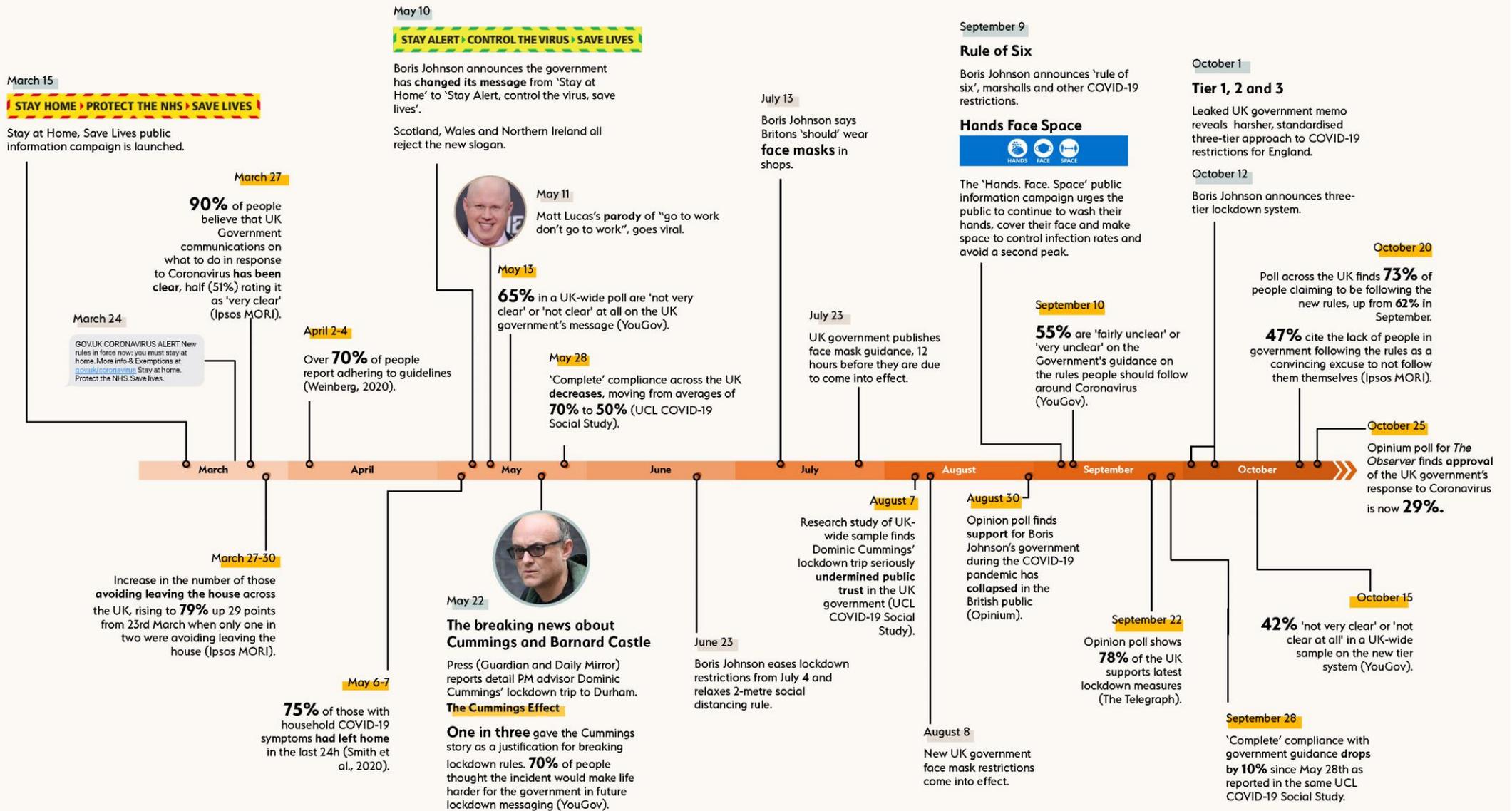
3. The content of COVID-19 messaging and its association with public understanding and adherence

The language of ‘the messaging’ has been central to the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis. It is through language that the relevant laws, regulations, rules, and guidance are written. These must be understood, interpreted, and acted upon by the public. The language of the law must be operationalized for enforcement by the police, bringing challenges of interpretation (e.g., [what counts as ‘mingling’](#)). It is through language that the press and social media report, select, headline, include, omit, and quote COVID-related law, rules, regulations, guidance, instructions, and advice. A wide range of people must explain the rules to others in settings where adherence requires interpersonal interventions (e.g., between bus-drivers and passengers).

Much public discourse has been dedicated to, variously, the lack of clarity in UK government messaging, the levels of confusion about the rules currently in place, and the timeliness of and preparations for successive amendments. There is also much research about the factors – including communicative ones – that impact people’s adherence to (and intentions to comply with) COVID-19 rules (e.g., [self-isolation](#)). A [summary of key findings](#) in this area notes that, “A clear and consistent communications strategy is vital for increasing adherence to and engagement with protective health behaviours ... public-spirited behaviour is most likely when there is clear and frequent communication, strong group identity, and an understanding of new social behaviours that enable compliance.”

A timeline of COVID-related messaging and key COVID events

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3.1 From 'Stay home' to 'Stay alert'

On March 15th 2020, the UK government launched the “**Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives**” campaign, with a [three-part structure](#) that is typical of human written and spoken interaction. On March 24th, a national ‘[Stay at Home](#)’ text message was distributed by mobile phone operators, which included the phrase, “**you must stay at home.**” Subsequent [polling](#) found that, by March 27th, 90% of people (aligned to all political parties and across age groups) believed that UK government communications on what to do in response to the coronavirus were clear, with half (51%) rating them as very clear. This clear understanding of the rules was associated with strong adherence to them. Between 27th and 30th March, the number of people avoiding leaving the house rose from 50% to 79%. By April 4th, over 70% reported adhering to this first set of messaging.

On Wednesday 6th May 2020, *The Telegraph*'s newspaper headline stated that the “‘Stay home’ advice” was “set to be scrapped” as “Boris Johnson changes message to ease UK out of lockdown”. *The Telegraph* appeared to lead this reporting via Twitter, culminating in the unveiling of the new campaign slogan, “**Stay Alert, control the virus, save lives**”, in *The Sunday Telegraph* on [Saturday May 9th](#), 2020. The change of message was therefore revealed in the media before new guidance from the UK government about what “**Stay Alert**” would actually mean, in terms of its behavioural enactment. According to *The Sunday Telegraph* report, the new slogan was devised by Isaac Levido and Ben Guerin, two social media strategists who advised the Conservatives during the 2019 election campaign, not the Government’s scientific advisors. The [First Minister of Scotland](#) stated that, “The Sunday papers is the first I’ve seen of the PM’s new slogan.”



The new messaging was the start of diverging approaches across the four nations of the UK. The First Minister of Wales “[decided the stay-at-home regulations must stay in place for another three weeks](#)” and the First Minister of Scotland wrote that “#StayHomeSaveLives remains my clear message to Scotland”. The clarity of the new messaging was [immediately challenged](#) by the public and professional bodies alike. The [government’s own ministers](#) were unable to clearly articulate what “Stay Alert” meant in behavioural terms. The First Minister of Scotland described it as “[vague and imprecise](#)”. And the new message was endlessly parodied and satirized, including its three-part structure and lexical choices (e.g., ‘[Meaningless slogan, three-word platitude, invoke heroism](#)’; ‘[Be vague, cover our backs, shirk responsibility](#)’).

The first message, “**Stay home**”, was lexically and grammatically precise – a straightforward locative imperative. The additional text message spelt it out more fully – “**you must stay at home**” – using the deontic modal verb ‘must’ to express requirement, strong obligation or necessity, and was explicit about the subject or agent of the instruction: ‘you’. In contrast to this precision and clarity, the new message was built for imprecision. By including the verb ‘ease’, *The Telegraph*'s own headline (“Boris Johnson changes message to *ease* UK out of lockdown”) reduced the seriousness, severity, and precise requirements of the situation. Whereas “**Stay alert**” maintained imperative grammar, the clear locative referent ‘home’ (most people have one home and know where it is) was replaced by an imprecise adjective, ‘alert’. ‘Alert’ is a cognitive state; it is subjective, open to interpretation,

imprecise. The vague “**Stay alert**” was extended across [six new government messages](#) that all contained hedges, conditions, and mitigations, none of which were any more behaviourally explicit than ‘alert’ itself:

- Stay at home **as much as possible**
- Work from home **if you can**
- Keep your distance **if you go out** (2m **where possible**)
- Wash your hands **regularly**
- **Limit** contact with other people
- Do not leave home **if** you or anyone in your household has symptoms

On May 10th 2020, the comedian Matt Lucas [released a parody version](#) of Boris Johnson’s announcement of the new ‘Stay alert’ campaign and its rules. Imitating Johnson’s voice, Lucas’s version (which, to date, has been retweeted 86.6K times and ‘liked’ 246.4K times via Lucas’s post alone), stated:

“So we are saying don’t go to work go to work; don’t take public transport go to work don’t go to work; stay indoors; if you can work from home go to work; don’t go to work; go outside don’t go outside; and uh and then we will or won’t uh... something or other.”

By Friday 22nd May 2020, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock [warned](#) “of the risk of returning to “square one” of the coronavirus lockdown as police chiefs said people were becoming blasé about social distancing”, comments which were “[echoed by senior police who said that the guidance to stay two metres apart, and meet only one other person, was being routinely ignored since the slight easing of lockdown rules.](#)” Two days later, the issue of the public’s adherence was intensified by the exposure of [Dominic Cummings’s infamous trip](#) to Barnard Castle. SAGE’s own advisors [went on record](#) to say that “in a few short minutes tonight, Boris Johnson has trashed all the advice we have given on how to build trust and secure adherence to the measures necessary to control COVID-19.”

In sum, the author of [a report](#) published on 13th October by polling/insights company J.L. Partners stated that “The viral Matt Lucas video has been **mentioned in every focus group on coronavirus** my firm has run since May.”

3.2 Where did we get to, by the end of October 2020?

The **Cummings affair** revealed the importance of consistency between messaging and behaviour in those designing strategy and rules. [Research](#) and polling following the incident reported a [sharp fall in public confidence](#) in the government, as well as it being used as a justification to [break lockdown rules](#). When public figures, and especially government ministers and their entourage, break their own rules, it engenders [public cynicism](#), anger, and disengagement which, in turn, reduces impact of even the mostly clearly crafted messaging. Indeed, in one [poll](#) published in late May, 70% of people thought the Cummings affair would make future lockdown messaging less successful. This reminds us that both the source and the message are important for adherence, and [research](#) found that “increased confidence in government to tackle the pandemic is longitudinally related to higher compliance.” In a [poll](#) published on **October 20th 2020**, 47% of respondents cited rule breaches by members of the government as a ‘convincing’ argument against following government rules.

Our analysis of the timeline of UK government messaging mapped to the public’s support for the government’s approach, and their understanding of and adherence to the rules and guidance, shows considerable shifts since the start of the pandemic. For example, on **March 27th 2020**, **90%** of people polled believed that UK government communications on what to do in response to COVID-19 was

clear, with half (51%) rating it as ‘very clear.’ By **October 21st 2020**, [police](#) and [legal experts](#) were publicly describing the ‘Tier 1, 2, and 3’ rules as unclear or incomprehensible, arguing that, for instance, its underpinning legislation involved “a mixture of micro-management of everyday lives and unresolvable ambiguity.” On October 22nd, the Minister for crime and policing, Kit Malthouse, also [described the Tier system as complex, and that people should check for themselves what the measures were](#). And by **October 25th 2020**, approval for the government’s response to COVID-19 “[is now at a record low of 29%, with 50% disapproving](#)”. The same poll reports that 44% of people say that the tier system is unclear, and 34% say they are not “confident that they know what the rules are in their own area”. Regarding adherence, the percentage of people flouting rules has increased (e.g., from 10% to 17% in 18-34 age group, and 10% to 18% in the 35-44 group).

4. Five principles, with recommendations, for clear and consistent messaging

The **cumulative imprecision** of the messaging has been accompanied by [decreased integrity and trust in government](#) and decreased legitimacy in its strategy. The [C19 Foresight Group](#) describes the problems of “rhetoric, over-promising and timing (where late night national announcements created negative impacts on the relationship with the public). Apparent conflicting activities (where two announcements seem to contradict) and stating ambitious targets that are then not achieved were aligned to eroding trust with the public.”

The associations between key phases of UK government COVID-19 messaging and public understanding of / adherence to the rules are summarized on the infographic timeline on page two of this report. It underpins the need for a thoroughgoing communication reset. The following principles and recommendations support such a reset.

Principle 1: Understand that messaging never merely provides factual information

- Along with what is directly stated, communications unavoidably convey all sorts of assumptions (the subtext, indirect meanings, implications, etc.).
- Contradictory messages should be avoided, not just within one communication channel or modality (e.g., on a poster) but in the combination of text, speech, headlines, subheadings, and images. For instance, messages about what to do indoors [should not be accompanied](#) by images of people outside on a beach.
- Spoken delivery is important and misspeaking will always be reported in the press. In early July 2020, Boris Johnson [was exceptionally unclear](#) when taking about “contact tracing”, as this [technical transcript](#) shows:

“.hh combi:ned, (0.3) with contract tast- (0.2) contact tasting: .h (0.3) uh- te-
testing: (0.5) .hh tracing.=>>forgi'me << contract- (.) contra:ct- ↑CONtact
<TRA:↓cing.> .hh”

Principle 2: Messaging should be precise and thus easy to enact and adhere to

- It is common for [written instructions](#) to be difficult (and sometimes impossible) to be empirically realised in communication and behaviour (e.g., setting up a one-way system for social distancing which makes exiting a building while following the rules impossible).
- A clear message is precise and directs action/behaviour without needing further clarification (“in other words...”), caveats, or clauses.
- A clear message is concise and should minimize the need for an ‘and’ which brings two instructions together – instead, they should be written as two separate instructions.
- There may be trade-offs between clarity and complexity/contingency (e.g., “be outside as much as you like”; “be indoors only with support bubble/family”).

- There is absolutely no point in trying to enforce strategies if people are not readily able to adopt them (e.g., because they cannot get a test).
- Positive messaging should enable more people to do more things safely, such as “Be indoors with your family bubble” or “Live life at two metres”.

Principle 3: Messaging should be ‘irony-resistant’

- There is a [large, interdisciplinary literature](#) on the [interactional practices](#) through which politicians obfuscate, equivocate, and exaggerate in their speeches and in their answers to questions. In the digital age, every speech and every answer are only one tweet away from being amplified for negative reasons. This both increases the illegitimacy of the message while reducing its clarity at the same time.
- As the Matt Lucas viral video showed, it is important that messaging is as ‘irony-resistant’ as possible. Ways to achieve this include reducing hyperbole, focusing on producing clarity rather than soundbites, and being open and honest by recognising the costs and benefits of strategies.

Principle 4: ‘Branding’ or sloganeering should not come at the expense of clarity and precision

- Both time and money go into generating the wording and design of COVID-19 slogans. While messaging that is concise may be memorable, it must also be enactable. For instance, two messages released on September 9th, 2020 were instant successes in terms of media impact. Both the “Rule of Six” and “Hands face space” got over 2 billion hits on a Google search and became popular hashtags (#RuleOfSix #HandsFaceSpace) on social media. However, subsequent [polling](#) found that 55% of people thought the UK government’s guidance on rules was “fairly” or “very unclear” and ‘complete compliance’, by the end of September, was [reportedly](#) achieved by only 40% of those asked.
- Boris Johnson was criticized for [getting the “Rule of Six” wrong on live television](#) and [council leaders reported](#) that the “‘rule of six’ was ‘unenforceable’, ‘contradictory and confusing’”.
- Unless one already has an understanding of what each component of the three-word instruction “Hands face space” means, its meaning is unclear:
 - “Face” may mean “I must not touch my face” and / or “I need a face covering”. Indeed, ‘face’ was (mis)understood as an instruction to [‘keep your face clean’ in one piece of guidance](#)
 - “Space” may refer to two metres, or one metre ‘plus’, given that the distancing instruction is itself unclear.
 - The current message on the [gov.uk website](#) (3rd November 2020) remains imprecise in key areas: “Make space: *Stay at least 2 metres apart – or 1 metre with a face covering or other precautions*”.
- Some of this messaging has been characterised as [‘fatal vagueness’](#).

Principle 5: Messaging should be underpinned by evidence about what is effective

- Messaging should generally focus on the collective – the ‘we’ and ‘us’, rather than the individual – where the strategy is also collective.
 - Messaging should build from the [psychology of Covid-19](#) which respects and support the collective resilience of the public rather than approaches which see people as ‘fragile rationalists’ - incapable of coping with crisis and needing shepherding by government.
 - Avoid using the term ‘behavioural fatigue’ to refer to a concept [for which there is no evidence](#): “*Instead of using the concept of “fatigue” to understand patterns of adherence to rules for preventing the spread of covid-19, we should focus on—and address—specific aspects of people’s capability, opportunity, and motivation*”.

- 'Fatigue' individualises psychological processes in ways that reify them into 'natural' (WHO's term) fragility and even pathology.
- Refer to the contexts in which the virus is transmitted (e.g., "superspreading events") in ways that do not individualise them (e.g., "superspreader", "Covidiot").
 - Select wording that builds cohesion rather than fuels blame. Avoid 'individualizing' words and phrases that pathologize people's responses to the pandemic (e.g., "anxious"), or divide them into in- and out-groups (e.g., "comfortable", "(ir)rational").
 - As noted earlier, on October 22nd Kit Malthouse (Minister for Crime and Policing) [described the Tier system as complex, and that people should check for themselves what the measures were](#). This is another way of individualizing people and removing blame about any non-adherence from those responsible for communicating clearly. Telling people to 'check the guidance' is also a way to avoid dealing with the contingent, pragmatic, and behavioural reality of people trying to navigate and enact unclear guidance.
- Messaging should, [according to social psychologists](#), "address not only what group members should do (so-called 'injunctive norms'), but also what they are typically doing ('[descriptive norms](#)'). Messages which hold examples of bad practice and say 'don't do this' can easily backfire because they can convey that many people in our group are behaving like this anyway, even if they know they shouldn't. Consequently, it is important to provide concrete examples of people showing concern for each other by keeping their distance (instead of hugging or sharing)."
 - Messaging also needs nuance. For instance, while [research](#) showed that the Cummings affair led to cynicism and lower levels of adherence for some, it also found others "were *more* likely to comply with social distancing guidelines and less likely to believe that it was OK to bend the rules (adjusting for all the other factors) ... Cummings may have become a useful anti-role model."
 - In times of massive uncertainty, strategies that enable people to gain a sense of personal and collective control are likely to be effective. However, given where we are in the pandemic, changing minds may be necessary.
 - [Research](#) shows the most productive route to influence people's actions is to use language that enables them to maintain a sense of their own integrity and agency despite, for some, reversing their position.
 - People generally prefer to change their mind in a way that enables them to [display autonomy](#) rather than be persuaded in response to an external party which infringes their right to make autonomous decisions.
 - Much of the messaging is empirically realised at the granular level of local interaction and people report finding it difficult if they see people not adhering in terms of whether to intervene (e.g., in supermarkets or on public transport). Some practices which may be effective include the following:
 - Assume that people who are not adhering have forgotten or misunderstood the guidance or are unable to comply with it. Most people comply when the rules are clear and consistent, and when resources are in place.
 - So, in terms of helping us all to help each other to comply – we should make offers (e.g., "Do you need a face covering?") – assume non-compliance is a resource-based issue; do informing or clarification (e.g., "In case you didn't know, we have to wear face coverings in areas like this") – assume non-compliance is because of forgetting or misunderstanding; remove moral implications (e.g., "I'm sure you didn't mean to"; "Sorry, it's a bit difficult to keep track of the rules, isn't it?").
 - Independent SAGE appended a comprehensive [communication strategy](#) for large organizations to a previous report.

5. Conclusion

The five principles set out above are designed to help deliver the communication reset recommended by Independent SAGE. They are also consistent with other national bodies, including [the C19 National Foresight Group](#): “Solutions discussed in the data included an **approach with more humility**, open discussion of how hard managing the pandemic is, an increase in **using straight forward language, the removal of all hyperbolic language and rhetoric**, a return to weekly or twice weekly briefings as England enters the second wave, and an open dialogue rather than speaking at the public. This latter concept of a dialogue and collaborative approach to managing the pandemic is best done through local structures and bodies who are already engaged in this way. There was also discussion on the need to **increase the simplicity of the restrictions** and a call to establish and **focus on what people can do rather than what they cannot**. There is a call in the data for government to spend time and thought in **re-establishing trust** with the public.”

While people report **lower levels of understanding**, there remains **good levels of support for measures and adherence**. A [poll](#) on October 22nd 2020 found “an increase in the number of Britons that claim to be following the coronavirus rules, up by 11 percentage points to **73%**, compared to 62% last month.” **This suggests that, with clearer messaging, with enactable guidance and rules, we can do better in dealing with the pandemic.** A [global projection of COVID-19 cases](#) published in September by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) suggested that “nearly 770,000 lives worldwide could be saved between now and January 1 2021 through proven measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing.” In other words, the measures that will immediately save lives right now are behavioural, not medical. Of the [factors that influence compliance](#), messaging is a “modifiable” one. Therefore, the government must be clear about how people must behave.

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Following the science