COMMONWEALTH
PARLIAMENTARY
ASSOCIATION UK

CPA UK HANDBOOK

PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATIONS DURING A CRISIS

CASE STUDIES FROM THE COMMONWEALTH

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **legislatures across the Commonwealth** began adapting their processes and implementing strategies to ensure the protection of parliamentary democracy amid the global crisis, which has required social distancing measures and lockdowns in many countries. At the heart of these strategies were the **Parliamentary Communications Departments**, responsible for ensuring the timely dissemination of crucial information to citizens, Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff.

CPA UK has developed this Handbook to highlight strategies implemented by a number of Commonwealth parliaments, in **communicating changes to parliamentary procedure** effectively, both internally to parliamentarians and staff but also externally to the general public.

It provides a model of good practice for Commonwealth Parliaments and is a resource to facilitate shared learning between legislatures. Focusing on the innovative approaches taken by a variety of different sized legislatures from different regions, case-studies have been gathered from the **Scottish Parliament, the House of Commons (UK), the Parliament of Australia, the Parliament of Singapore and the Parliament of Botswana.**

In analysing the steps taken to ensure effective parliamentary communications during a crisis, this Handbook identifies **six key techniques** for parliamentary teams to take including working across departments and working with the media.

ESTABLISHING A CLEAR STRATEGY

The nature of the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the speed at which crises can develop. Establishing a clear strategy for Parliamentary communications in times of crisis is essential to ensure that Members, parliamentary staff and citizens are well informed of key decisions and information.

CASE-STUDY 1

THE PARLIAMENT OF BOTSWANA

In Botswana, a **Covid-19 Communication Committee** was established when the pandemic was beginning to spread worldwide and prevalence of the pathogen was starting to be recorded in Southern Africa.

The Covid-19 Communication Committee, that consisted of staff from various parliamentary units and departments, was set up to find a secure, convenient and fast way of disseminating information and updates to Members and parliamentary staff.

The Committee also provided the link between Members of Parliament and the Executive (Cabinet) if Parliament was required to convene quickly.

CASE-STUDY **2**

THE PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

As part of its Covid-19 response planning, the Parliament of Australia set as a priority **the maintenance of its internal communication channels.** Ensuring strong communication channels through which staff could be contacted and updated was a vital component to ensure the federal parliament could maintain business continuity.

A number of steps were taken to ensure crisis communications were in place, including:

- **Communication Trees:** ensuring all staff were contactable by reviewing and updating communications trees - one of the organisational processes for contacting staff;

- **Covid-19 Response Webpage:** An internal webpage was set up, to provide staff with policy updates and human resource information, as well as practical guidance on remote working;

- **SMS Alert System:** Text messaging was utilised to directly and simultaneously reach staff on their mobile phones with updates. Following this early response planning, work moved to meeting the new communication needs of a workforce largely working from home.

This included the roll out of a **Virtual Desktop**, enabling staff to work securely from their home computers through enhanced remote access, and the setting up of tele-conference profiles on the Chorus Call platform for different workgroups, alongside the use of video-conferencing tools Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
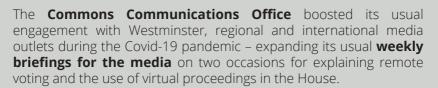
ENGAGING THE MEDIA AND UTILISING SOCIAL MEDIA

Traditional media as a communication channel holds an important role in any democratic society, and in times of crisis it becomes crucial that citizens are kept informed about changes to parliamentary processes and key announcements. This can be done effectively by adapting or increasing engagement with the media and utilising social media platforms to disseminate information.

CASE-STUDY 3

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS UK PARLIAMENT

The **Commons Communications Office** boosted its usual engagement with Westminster, regional and international media outlets during the Covid-19 pandemic – expanding its usual **weekly briefings for the media** on two occasions for explaining remote voting and the use of virtual proceedings in the House.

Delivered online by senior Commons clerks, these briefings were attended by over 50 journalists and meant media outlets were able to produce accurate reports for the public, based on impartial and authoritative information directly from parliamentary staff.

Additionally, the media team facilitated **broadcast packages** for all major media outlets, which included inviting cameras into the Chamber to record and report on virtual proceedings on a pooled basis. The House of Commons **official photographer** also remained

on the estate to capture the behind the scenes preparation for changes taking place in the UK Parliament, as well as historic events including the first virtual Prime Minister's Questions.
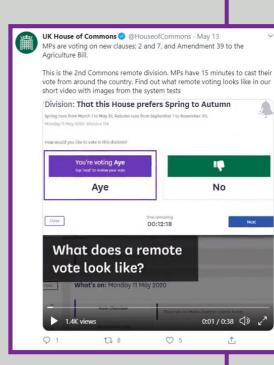
The use of different **social media platforms** can also allow legislatures to convey concise messaging more widely and increase engagement amongst different groups in society. With almost 300 enquiries in the month of March alone, the House of Commons media team produced factual briefing notes outlining how procedures had changed.

The House of Commons Communications team also produced engaging **Twitter cards and infographics** for the Houses' social media channels, providing answers to common questions on Parliament under Covid-19.

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

In the Scottish Parliament, the Presiding Officer undertook a range of **media interviews** with traditional and social media outlets to ensure the work of the Parliament was communicated to as wide an audience as possible. The Scottish Parliament also produced **video content,** mainly using MS Teams, featuring committee conveners and other Members of Parliament, which was regularly placed on social media to update the public.

THE PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE

Press releases from the Parliament of Singapore were fed to the local mainstream media. The full text of the Speaker's announcements were also uploaded onto the Parliament **website** and official **Facebook Page** so that the public could easily access information.

CREATING INTERNAL FAQS PAGES

In order to ensure the effective and timely dissemination of crucial information to parliamentary staff during a crisis, internal Frequently Asked Questions pages can be set up on parliamentary intranet sites.

Consistent email signposting to these pages is one highly effective way of ensuring staff are aware of any changes as well as the planning and preparation for future adjustments. These pages can be updated as regularly as necessary.

Internal FAQs can cover updates on a range of issues such as government advice, access to parliamentary buildings, health and safety, staff welfare, human resource matters, advice on home-working, digital guidance and changes to parliamentary practice and procedure.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, this strategy was utilised effectively by the Scottish Parliament to communicate key information. Two separate pages were created for Members and staff to improve navigation and ensure that information relevant to different roles was easily accessible.

The UK House of Commons also maintain the Coronavirus Intranet Hub, providing Members and staff with a central resource hosting all relevant information and guidance around parliament under Covid-19.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

Commonwealth Parliaments demonstrated innovation in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was not only with regards to the continued functioning of Parliaments but also due to maintaining effective communications internally and externally.

THE PARLIAMENT OF BOTSWANA

The Covid-19 Communications Committee implemented **WhatsApp Groups** in order to quickly interact with Members and disseminate information. The WhatsApp groups proved effective as Members have continued access to mobile phones with relatively good network coverage in Botswana (79%).

As well as its use in maintaining communication, the Parliament of Botswana was also able to convene **two emergency meetings** of Parliament through WhatsApp.

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

A **Microsoft Teams Live Event** was used for the Chief Executive's first live address to all staff in late April. Following this, the Chief Executive's meetings continued to be facilitated virtually.

A **staff survey** was developed in conjunction with the HR department, to ensure staff were included and heard during the pandemic.

THE PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

An **external password protected public website** was created to provide updates to parliamentary staff in the event they were unable to access departmental systems and intranets.

CROSS-TEAM COLLABORATION

With various teams working across any one legislature on different aspects of operations, constant communication between departments is vital in fast-changing situations, particularly when facilitating rapid changes to the way parliaments work.

In working across teams to manage communications during a crisis, parliaments can ensure they involve all the relevant actors to guarantee clear and coordinated messaging is communicated both internally and externally.

CASE-STUDY 4

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the **Incident Management Team (IMT)** and **Incident Communications Team (ICT)** were activated to manage and communicate all aspects of the Parliament's response.

The ICT is a cross cutting communications team involving staff from Media Relations, Web and Social Media, Public Information, Internal Communications and Human Resources. As the Covid-19 situation developed, ICT had regular meetings, in some cases daily, to **coordinate all internal and external communications**, drafting and disseminating information to Members, staff and the public.

Key information was shared through various channels including emails, the website and internal intranet, online discussions, social media channels and building signage.

MESSAGING FROM SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY FIGURES

Receiving communications from senior figures in parliament provides staff with clarity on the level at which an emergency is being managed, whilst also creating a lead voice in a situation through regular updates. Hearing from individuals including Speakers and Presiding Officers also emphasises the common goal amongst parliamentary communities: that of delivering parliamentary democracy for the electorate, even through extraordinary times.

CASE-STUDY 5

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS UK PARLIAMENT

The Communications Team developed **staff bulletins**, which included weekly videos from members of the Management Board. Senior parliamentary leaders talked about successes in their teams, how they have adapted in response to Covid-19 and provided tips and guidance to staff on working from home.

The House of Commons held several **virtual all staff town hall meetings** where parliamentary staff could hear from and question Members of the Commons Executive Board on the various changes to ways of working.

The **Clerk and Director General** sent letters to parliamentary staff by email to provide a more personalised overview of the circumstances, thanking staff for their work and helping to boost morale.

Similar communications were sent to Members and their staff from the House of Commons Speaker.

CONCLUSION

This Handbook has highlighted **six key steps adopted across a diverse range of Commonwealth parliaments**, with some similarities in the approaches taken to delivering their communications strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the use of resource pages and increasing collaboration with media outlets.

These case-studies have also shown that successful communication strategies are designed around **unique jurisdictions** and take into account local factors such as **availability of hardware, access to new software and network strengths for remote working and communication**. Whilst these key communication techniques were based on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, they are generally applicable in times of crisis.

The value of shared learning has been proven during the Covid-19 Pandemic. At a time when parliaments have had to adapt and respond quickly in unprecedented circumstances, we hope that this handbook on **Parliamentary Communications During a Crisis** will be a useful resource to the CPA community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CPA UK
Westminster Hall | Houses of Parliament | London | SW1A 0AA
T: +44 (0)207 219 5373
W: www.uk-cpa.org
E: cpauk@parliament.uk