National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

Communications Directorate progress report

This report provides an update on key issues and developments in the Communications Directorate in the period November - December 2020.

Summary of activity

During this period the directorate continued to provide communications support to COVID-19 activities, including leading on promotion of the 'long Covid' guideline, produced in collaboration with system partners. Staff in the directorate also focused attention on preparing a communication strategy to support the launch of the new 5-year strategic plan.

Notable issues and developments

Ongoing response to COVID-19

We provided media and external communications support for publication, jointly with SIGN and RCGP, of the rapid guideline on managing the long-term effects of COVID-19. The announcement received widespread national media coverage, including on [BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55352409) and [ITV news](https://www.itv.com/news/2020-12-18/long-covid-28-symptoms-of-the-long-term-effects-of-coronavirus-identified-for-first-time), the [Daily Telegraph](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/18/long-covid-sufferers-should-offered-psychiatric-care-symptoms/), [Daily Express](https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/1374452/long-covid-update-symptoms-national-institute-of-clinical-excellence-guidelines), [Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/18/long-covid-guidance-urges-referral-uk-clinics-four-weeks), Daily Mail, the [Independent](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-long-covid-nhs-check-ups-hospital-nice-b1775986.html) and [MSN UK](https://www.msn.com/en-gb/health/medical/patients-hospitalised-with-coronavirus-should-have-long-covid-check-six-weeks-after-discharge/ar-BB1c2yoF). It also received coverage in the trade media, including [BMJ](https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4915) and Nursing Times.

We provided similar support for publication of the NICE and PHE guidance on vitamin D and COVID-19, which said there is not enough evidence to support taking vitamin D to prevent or treat COVID-19 and calls for more research and randomised controlled trials. This received widespread coverage from mainstream media outlets such as the [BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55333063), [Daily Telegraph](file:///%5C%5Cnice.nhs.uk%5CData%5CCommunications%5CPress%20and%20Media%5CCoverage%20reports%5CDTelegraphVitD16122020.pdf), [Times](file:///%5C%5Cnice.nhs.uk%5CData%5CCommunications%5CPress%20and%20Media%5CCoverage%20reports%5CTimesVitD16122020.pdf), [Daily Mail](file:///%5C%5Cnice.nhs.uk%5CData%5CCommunications%5CPress%20and%20Media%5CCoverage%20reports%5CDMailVitD16122020.pdf), [Metro](file:///%5C%5Cnice.nhs.uk%5CData%5CCommunications%5CPress%20and%20Media%5CCoverage%20reports%5CMetroVitD16122020.pdf) and [Press Association](file:///%5C%5Cnice.nhs.uk%5CData%5CCommunications%5CPress%20and%20Media%5CCoverage%20reports%5CPAVitD16122020.pdf). It was also covered in trade media including [the BMJ](https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4912), [Nursing In Practice](https://www.nursinginpractice.com/latest-news/more-research-needed-on-vitamin-ds-effectiveness-in-treating-covid/), [Pharmaceutical Journal](https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com/news-and-analysis/news/not-enough-evidence-for-use-of-vitamin-d-in-prevention-or-treatment-of-covid-19-nice-rapid-guidance-concludes/20208673.article?firstPass=false), [GP Online](https://www.gponline.com/not-enough-evidence-vitamin-d-treat-prevent-covid-19-says-nice/article/1703043), [GM Journal](https://www.gmjournal.co.uk/nice-says-not-enough-evidence-to-treat-covid-with-vitamin-d), [The Pharmacist](https://www.thepharmacist.co.uk/news/covid-19/not-enough-evidence-to-support-taking-vitamin-d-to-treat-or-prevent-c-19/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=not-enough-evidence-to-support-taking-vitamin-d-to-treat-or-prevent-c-19) and [Pharmacy.Biz](https://www.pharmacy.biz/not-enough-evidence-that-taking-vitamin-d-can-treat-or-prevent-coronavirus-nice/).

Risks

There is a risk that the communications directorate will not be able to fully support or enable the implementation of the 5-year strategic plan because it is not currently resourced or configured adequately to do so. We will mitigate this risk in part by looking at our current activities and processes to find potential areas where we can free up resources. We will also continue to work with the Executive Team to identify additional resources.

There is a risk that productivity and staff morale are adversely affected by the current wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly a risk amongst parents of school-aged children who are working and home-schooling. Mitigating the risk includes suspending our carers leave policy during the period of school closures to allow more flexibility for parents, and by identifying activities that can be paused during this period.

Strategic communications advice and support

During the last two months we have developed proposals for a communications plan to socialise, launch and start to embed NICE's 5-year strategy across our audiences.

Our launch plan sets out how we will deliver a full range of complementary, effective and engaging stakeholder, organisational development, internal and external communications activity. It includes pre-launch engagement events with staff and stakeholders, a launch event in April to be opened by Lord Bethell, a redesigned website homepage, intranet pages, videos and graphics, and proactive media work.

Along with a range of communications collateral, we are supporting the editing, design and production for the 5-year strategy document itself, to run in parallel with the production of the 2021-22 corporate business plan and a review and update of the NICE Charter. The strategy will be designed by an external agency in February/March, ready for publication in April.

Our plan also contains a complementary internal campaign to promote and embed the new values and behaviours for NICE as a core part of how everyone will work together to deliver our strategic aims.

 This communications plan represents the first stage of a communications approach that will be developed as a key enabler of the 5-year strategy as the detail continues to emerge (e.g. narrative and implementation). Our longer-term aim is to provide a steady drumbeat of communications that tell a story of decisions, development and delivery of our strategic objectives over the next few years.

As the Centre for Health Technology Evaluation (CHTE) began the next phase of consultations to review its methods and processes we provided communications support and advice, including supporting the delivery of a webinar on proposed changes to topic selection, and stakeholder engagement to encourage participation in the online consultation. Coverage included NHSE England and NHS Improvement’s ‘Healthcare Leaders Update’ e-bulletin, which goes to the CEO and COO of all trusts and CCGs.

We promoted the latest impact report, which looked at prostate cancer care. Partner organisations were encouraged to share it through their networks, including Taunton and Somerset Hospital, Prostate Cancer UK and the Society and College of Radiographers. National Health Executive featured a [blog](https://www.nationalhealthexecutive.com/articles/NICE-prostate-cancer-care-treatment) on their website in which Jennifer Watts, associate director of adoption and impact, discussed the main findings from the report.

We also promoted the quality standard on heavy menstrual bleeding to relevant royal colleges and other stakeholders.

Enquiries

During November and December, we responded to 1138 enquiries. Ninety two percent were answered within 18 days. We responded to 15 requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act, 24 MP letters, 20 parliamentary questions and provided contributions to DHSC for 2 coroner’s reports.

Notable enquiry topics in this reporting period included:

* COVID-19 including interest in the rapid guideline on the long-term effects of COVID-19 and continued interest in vitamin D for the prevention or treatment of COVID-19.
* The draft guideline on ME/CFS during the consultation period which ended in December.
* The CDF review of recommendations for nivolumab for treatment of melanoma.

Media

Sentiment percentages for media coverage in November and December were as follows:

* Positive 83%
* Neutral 10%
* Negative 7%

In December, NICE successfully completed the first assessment using the digital health technologies guidance development pilot project - the [Zio XT service](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/MTG52). To support this, the media team issued a press release and published a [news story](https://www.nice.org.uk/news/article/innovative-technology-to-detect-abnormal-heart-rhythms-recommended-by-nice-for-nhs-use-while-further-data-is-collected). It was picked up by the [Clinical Services Journal](https://www.clinicalservicesjournal.com/story/34373/technology-to-detect-abnormal-heart-rhythms-recommended-by-nice), [Health Tech World](https://www.htworld.co.uk/news/cardiac-care-monitor-passes-through-health-tech-pilot/) and [med-Tech Innovation](https://www.med-technews.com/news/irhythm-solution-passes-through-digital-health-tech-pilot/).

The publication of the draft updated guideline on the diagnosis and management of CFS/ME was generally well received by the media. It gained widespread national and trade media, a particular focus of which was the recommendation that graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy should no longer be offered as treatments for the condition. This draft continues to attract significant social media activity which we are monitoring and responding to where appropriate.

In November we [published a blog](https://www.nice.org.uk/news/blog/how-nice-is-improving-patient-safety) by Professor Kevin Harris, NICE's senior responsible officer for patient safety, to highlight NICE's role in improving patient safety. The blog talks about why the role was established and introduces the ideas behind proposals to develop a unified approach to patient safety, integrating the work already happening across the organisation.

Audience insights

Planning has begun on the next biennial NICE reputation research project which is scheduled for fieldwork in spring 2021 and completion in summer 2021.

Events and conferences

The final 3 virtual events in our autumn series took place in November attracting 614 external delegates and 158 members of NICE staff. The event topics were: Putting people first: Collaborating for better medicines support; NICE’s Life Sciences offer now and in the future: Learning from COVID-19; and the annual NICE Shared Learning Awards. The winning Shared Learning entry came from the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust for their work on 'prescribing guidelines for patients with a first episode of psychosis'.

The secretariat of Heath Technology Assessment International (HTAi) is expected to take the decision on 27 January to cancel the in-person 2021 annual meeting scheduled for June in Manchester. NICE is hosting the event with Health Improvement Scotland and the All Wales Therapeutics and Toxicology Centre.

The NICE Annual Conference in Manchester, which had been postponed until May 2021 due to COVID-19, has now been cancelled due to ongoing uncertainty about delivering an in-person event. Speakers, booked delegates and exhibitors have been informed by Dods Group, our conference organiser. In 2021 we will deliver a series of virtual events to support the launch and implementation of the new strategic plan and will secure speaking platforms for NICE representatives at third party virtual events. We will return to in-person conferences and events when it is safe and practical to do so, with a view to holding an annual conference in 2022.

Marketing communications

In December, a paid social media marketing campaign was launched on LinkedIn aimed at increasing applications to the joint LSE and NICE executive master's programme, '[Evaluation of Health Care Interventions and Outcomes'](https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Graduate/Degree-programmes-2020/Executive-MSc-Evaluation-Health-Care-Interventions). One objective of the marketing campaign was to gain insight into the most responsive target audience based on interests, job role, location (UK vs EU) and sector, and to assess effective advertising formats. The first intake of students will be June 2021. Evaluation results of the campaign are due in early February.

In November, the team organised a NICE Scientific Advice (NSA) masterclass webinar with members of the Association of British Health-tech Industries (ABHI). It focussed on how NICE evaluates MedTech and the support NICE offers to MedTech developers. Invitations went to a total of 310 ABHI member organisations which generated 145 registrations from 80 different organisations spanning 10 countries. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with attendees saying the session was useful and that they would recommend the webinar to a colleague. A similar masterclass is planned with the Ethical Medicines Industry Group (EMIG) in January.

We created a new corporate PowerPoint template to improve and standardise the presentation of slides at external meetings. The template uses the brand guidelines and colour palette to good effect with a bold and simple design, which encourages the use of Comms-approved (and COVID-19-sensitive) stock photography, graphics and icons to present information about our work in a professional and appealing way.

Our corporate newsletters, NICE News and Update for Primary Care (UPC) met performance benchmarks in the reporting period with an average open rate of 25% and average click through rate of 5%. Subscriptions to NICE News have increased slightly to 32,400, while subscribers to UPC have remained static at 12,560.

The Chief Executive’s Update achieved an open rate of 27.7% in November, when the topic covered was our technology evaluation methods review. In December, content focused on the impact NICE guidance and the open rate was 27.5%. Benchmark: 28% (based on 6 months of data).

Website: content and performance

We continue to support the business through the delivery of new web content for key pieces of work such as the [methods consultation for health technology evaluation](https://www.nice.org.uk/about/what-we-do/our-programmes/nice-guidance/chte-methods-consultation), [models for the evaluation and purchase of antimicrobials](https://www.nice.org.uk/about/what-we-do/life-sciences/scientific-advice/models-for-the-evaluation-and-purchase-of-antimicrobials) and to [highlight NICE’s role in patient safety](https://www.nice.org.uk/about/what-we-do/our-programmes/patient-safety) in light of the Cumberlege Report.

We have created a [centralised point for stakeholder registration](https://www.nice.org.uk/Get-Involved/stakeholder-registration). Previously, the central stakeholder registration page only directed people to register as a stakeholder in guidelines and quality standards and indicators. The new page includes diagnostic technologies and medical technologies, and allows people to register an interest in interventional procedures. There is also a section on invitation only areas of work. This is part of the ongoing stakeholder engagement work, and will provide helpful analytics and user insight to feed into the programme.

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