

Government Engagement Initiative

Summary:

- We propose a 'Government Engagement Initiative' as an integral component in an approach to the control of COVID-19 rooted in partnership with the public.
- The initiative could have three strands: (a) a platform for members of the public to communicate both the problems they have in adhering to preventative measures and the solutions they propose; (b) consultation with grassroots experts (community representatives, charity organisers, faith leaders etc.); (c) discussion of ideas using Citizens Councils
- Any initiative needs to be widely publicised, including information of inputs that have influenced policy/practice.

Rationale:

The success of Government policy on COVID-19 is dependent on the trust and adherence of the public. A Government Engagement Initiative (GEI) enhances this in two ways. First, it shows that the government is treating the public with trust: listening and responding to them. Second, it provides practical insights concerning the difficulties that people are having in adhering to restrictions and ideas as to how these can be overcome.

Added contribution:

A GEI could complement and extend existing forms of data gathering that are generally top down – asking the public to respond to questions posed by the centre – by allowing the public to address matters that are salient to them. In this way it can catch important issues that would otherwise be overlooked. Moreover, it allows the public to input solutions as well as concerns. Finally, it exemplifies a partnership approach in which government not only guides but is guided by the public.

Practical issues

A GEI would require a series of practical steps:

1. Means for the public to input information: this could use phones, email, letters. It could also involve the use of an app – either a dedicated app or else bundled in with other app initiatives
2. A process for logging and triaging inputs to select those that are constructive and useful.
3. A process for following up on useful inputs – both to check they are genuine and to understand the context. This could use a volunteer force of trained interviewers.
4. Building a network of grassroots experts who can both feed in ideas themselves and also be consulted on other ideas.
5. Drawing in existing participatory democracy structures (Citizens Councils, the Citizens Assembly etc.) to address ideas and issues around COVID-19.

Location and longevity

While we propose an initiative or strategy is developed specifically in relation to COVID-19, such an initiative would be of relevance to any crisis and hence could be considered as an integral part of national resilience. This has implications for where, within Government, the initiative would be located – although there are different models allowing the work to be done with external partners (e.g. Sciencewise).