Speech at the CPPS Seminar “What future for Government Communications?” 20 January 2005

Introduction
My brief today is to set out how, one year on, the Government is responding to the agenda set out in the Phillis Report [and to the challenges set out by earlier speakers.]

I am very clear about the future for government communication – it is one driven by the views and needs of the public. Government Communication succeeds when it puts the public first. Get this right and you have effective communication.

Permanent Secretary, Government Communication
The fact that I am here today as the Permanent Secretary, Government Communication is evidence of a significant change in the way that Government manages communication.

The Phillis Review recommended that the post of Director of Communications, then held by Alastair Campbell – a special adviser with executive powers, be split into two new roles. One would continue to be a special adviser, focused on the Prime Minister’s communication strategy, but without the executive
powers. The second role, a civil servant, would be head of profession for all government communicators.

Today, David Hill is the Prime Minister’s Director of Communication without the executive powers. I am the first Permanent Secretary, Government Communication.

David Hill and I work together in complementary roles. While the Prime Minister’s Official Spokesperson and the civil servants in the Downing Street press office officially report to me, I am not involved in the day to day media activity at No.10.

My role is to head up a Centre of Excellence for all communication disciplines within government and to take a fundamental look at the way government communicates. The aim, in line with Phillis’s recommendations, is to adopt a strategic approach, to better inform and respond to the requirements of citizens and people who use and work in public services.

In essence I want to do two things. One is to make the voice of the public heard at the policy table so that government develops and delivers services which reflect customer expectations and desires. And secondly, I want to build on the professional capacity of government communications so that we can
increase public awareness and understanding of government policies and actions. This will mean that the public are better able to identify and access public services as and when they are needed. We live in an age when governments need to do more than simply introduce legislation to enact their policies – successful government involves both persuading the public and professionals communities of the need for legislation and engaging them in the process of developing laws and processes that will deliver the agreed policy aims. This means communication needs to be built into the policy process from conception to implementation.

What have I found?
So, six months into my role what have I found? Firstly, there is a strong appetite within the Civil Service for reform, to bring in new skills and to have them taken as seriously. Communication, alongside finance, HR, strategy and project management, is an area where the Civil Service wants to become more professional.

As part of a wide-ranging agenda to improve public services, the Professional Skills for Government initiative, led by Sir Andrew Turnbull, is about ensuring that the Civil Service has
professional skills and expertise in every area. My communication Centre of Excellence will sit alongside those for IT, HR and Finance which are also led by expert practitioners.

It is an opportunity to lay to rest, once and for all, the generalist/specialist labels which have dogged the civil service for years. Neither label does anyone any favours. The generalist label too easily morphs into the tag of the gifted amateur, drifting rapidly and superficially from one subject to another and bringing no professionalism to the work. The specialist tag, while carrying an implication of some professionalism, has too often contributed to a sense of isolation.

This sense of isolation, of a “them and us” mentality was very apparent to everyone on the Phillis Review. Phillis wanted to reposition communication as being integral to good government, rather than a bolt-on at the end of the policy process.

The Professional Skills for Government agenda will help me to do just that. Communications is now centrally positioned, feeding into the three departmental core functions: policy advice, operational delivery and corporate services.

What does this mean for Government Communications?
Becoming an integral part of policy development and delivery means that there is a wider and more ambitious remit for government communication.

We need to move on from a culture of announcement – where the Minister makes an announcement once all the policy development has been done – to a culture of explanation – where communication informs all stages of the policy making process.

In government, we want to use communication not just to tell the world about what government is doing, but also to bring the views of the public to the centre of policy and service development, and use research and consultation to inform and refine our thinking.

We need to plan and approach communication with the final audience, the public, in mind. If we use the right language, listen to the views and reactions of the public and other stakeholders and communicate in ways that are trusted and appropriate for each group, we stand a good chance of really communicating. We need to understand and respond to the extraordinary growth in new communication channels such as e-mail and text messaging and use these channels to build new bridges between government and those it governs. Over time, this more interactive approach should improve the public’s
understanding of what the government is doing as well as help
government understand the environment in which its policies
have to operate. This would be a big prize indeed!

At the same time as developing this new remit we have to
maintain our grip on the traditional skills, especially media
relations. The media environment is frenzied - hundreds of
channels and outlets, constant noise levels, a media hungry for
news and driven by an apparent endless consumer appetite for
celebrity news and sizzling soundbites. There is almost as much
discussion about the public’s lack of trust in the media as that of
politicians, but, despite this, for nearly all public organisations
media handling is, and always will be, a critical function.

News management is the most well-known part of government
communication but it is by no means all of it. My aim will be to
ensure that all the techniques in the modern communications
toolkit have equal status.

As I have said - I am very clear about the future for
government communication – it is one driven by the views
and needs of the public. I want to build a network of
communicators who are equipped with the highest
professional standards to take this forward. Support and
training mechanisms will provide all government
communicators with the confidence and skills to enable them to engage more directly with the public and in turn bring the public’s views to the policy table. But if we are broadening the emphasis we do not want to change our heritage or our values, we need to ensure the impartiality and neutrality of the Civil Service continue to underpin all our communication activity

Redefining the GICS
Part of that heritage is the Government Information and Communication Service. One of my first tasks was to look long and hard at the cross-government GICS network. Phillis decided its structure was not fit for purpose and called for it to be replaced and upgraded.

Actually, my colleagues in Finance, HR and Strategy are rather envious of how well connected we are in communication, and my ability to talk to those working in communication across government. (It would perhaps be rather telling if we didn’t, as communicators, have such a good network!)

The GICS set clear standards for the different specialisms within communications which are used across departments for recruitment and promotion. I do not want to lose that – rigorous standards in recruitment and promotion are vital guardians of
our professional abilities and ethics. Other professions are now following our lead.

More inclusive network
But the GICS did not reach everyone involved in communication. Since my arrival I have met many communicators, both GICS and non-GICS, at all levels, all with the same passionate commitment to professional standards and a desire to learn from each other and share knowledge.

As a result we are replacing the GICS with a new professional network – the Government Communication Network.

The Government Communication Network, unlike the GICS, will encompass all those who work in communication across government. The highest professional standards will be the cornerstone of the new network. It will support and connect all government communicators – from those working in internal, stakeholder and e-communication to those that are marketing specialists and press officers. It will offer personal, practical and professional support to individuals helping them do their jobs more effectively. I want it to grow into a network that is confident in its abilities, valued by all its customers and respected by its peers. A stint in government communication should be seen
as a valuable addition to any professional communicator’s CV.

Continuous professional development will be key to delivering high standards across all fields of communication. Professor Anne Gregory, from Leeds Met University and current President of the IPR, is working with us to develop a professional development programme which will have external accreditation from both the Chartered Institute of Marketing and the IPR. We plan to offer the first stage of this to GCN members in the spring.

One of the most important benefits of the network will be spreading learning and knowledge across government and the wider industry.

I want to see government communicators able to learn from the best and most customer driven approaches in the private sector and adapt these disciplines to the unique circumstances of government. I also see this as a two-way street – when I worked in the private sector I found government trained communicators to be a highly valuable resource – bright, disciplined, and able to deal with complex and sensitive political environments.
I am keen to encourage a two-way exchange between government, the broader public sector and the private sector at all levels - on both a short and a longer term basis.

Good communicators should be able to learn from both public and private sector experience and both sectors could benefit from collaborating on issues such as measurement and evaluation, the role of communication and how to build professionalism.

Standards and assessment
As well as developing individuals’ professional capacity we want to increase the communications capability within departments as a whole. As I mentioned earlier the Professional Skills for Government initiative which is looking at how departments use communications as they develop and deliver policies and services.

We already have a review process which uses communication professionals from different departments to assess how communication directorates perform in the various departments and agencies. We are extending this by developing a self-assessment process for departments to measure their capability on a more regular basis.
We want to ensure that communication strategies are aligned to meet audience and customer needs. Alongside self assessment, we will use external comparisons to ensure that government communications measures up to best practice in the private sector..

Co-ordination
We will be using the new network to improve the co-ordination of our efforts. Of course it makes sense for campaigns and strategies to be managed within the relevant departments, but we need to co-ordinate more effectively across government. Human beings can only take in a limited number of messages at one time, and better co-ordination should avoid us throwing too many communication tennis balls at any one group at any one time and, hopefully, save the taxpayers money!

The broader communication remit
If we are to move on from a culture of announcement to one of dialogue and debate then marketing intelligence needs to be brought together earlier in the cycle to help inform policy development and delivery. We need to be more radar and less loud-hailer.
During the Phillis review, we commissioned our own research which reinforced other published evidence that people are generally most interested in government when it affects them personally and in their own communities. They are interested in their local school, their local hospital, crime in the area, less so in national statistics and performance. The public want to be involved, but on their own terms. They trust local media, television, radio and press more than they do the national media.

If we can focus more communication effort and resource on interpreting national policy into what it means for people locally, become less reliant on the national media and use a wider range of communication channels then we have a better chance of really engaging people.

The research was also extremely clear that the public do not think in departmental terms but look to government as a whole for information. This is why an effective web-based strategy is so important to the future direction of government communication. We will be working with departments to ensure that our communication reflects the reality and desires of our customers not our own structures and processes.

And finally,
I would like to leave you with the guiding principles that have governed our thinking about the future direction of government communications. Government Communication needs to embody:

- Openness;
- More direct, unmediated communication to the public;
- Genuine engagement with the public;
- Positive explanation;
- Use of all relevant channels of communication;
- Co-ordination across departments; and
- Reinforcement of the civil service’s political neutrality.

The changes that I have set out will not happen overnight. New ways of working will cut across well established patterns. Like all change it will take time. But the striking feature of my first six months in post has been the degree of consensus among government communicators, senior officials and Ministers about the need and desire for this change. With this consensus I am confident we will make this happen.