

Sense about Science launches 'What Counts?': an inquiry into obtaining and using evidence for Covid-19 decisions

Early results of a national survey show public interest in government information on Covid-19 has waned – especially among young people - but over half of UK adults have been using government statistics and medical websites

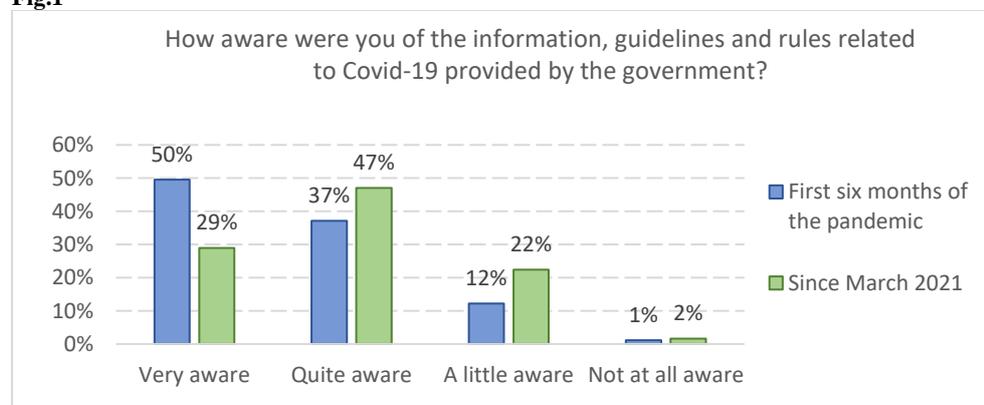
The proportion of the UK who reported being ‘very aware’ of government Covid-19 information, guidelines and rules is 21 percentage points lower for the period since March 2021 than it was during the first 6 months of the pandemic, according to a survey conducted for Sense about Science by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)ⁱ.

The survey’s first results, released today, mark the opening of an inquiry by Sense about Science into people’s experiences with obtaining and using the evidence for policies, inside and outside government. Public submissions to the inquiry are now open.

The survey, conducted in September and October 2021 with 2563 UK adults, has looked at who used government information sources and whether people got what they needed from them. It also found that people engaged less frequently with government Covid-19 information since March 2021 compared to 2020. Initial analysis indicates that the decrease was larger in younger people. The national survey shows a mixed picture in relation to different government sources, with higher than expected levels of engagement with sources such as the ONS website, Public Health England data dashboard and reports of government statistics.

- Comparison between the first six months of the pandemic and the period since March this year shows a 21 percentage point decrease in the proportion ‘very aware’ of government Covid-19 information:

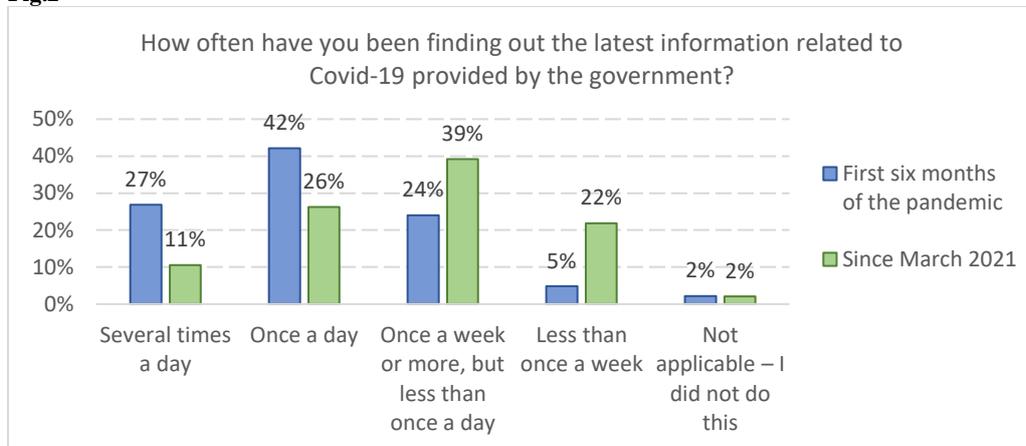
Fig.1



The largest decrease in awareness was among 18 to 29 year olds, where the proportion reporting being ‘very aware’ declined by 30 percentage points (Table 1 below)

- The *frequency* of public engagement with government Covid-19 information was also lower since March 2021 compared to the first 6 months of the pandemic:

Fig.2

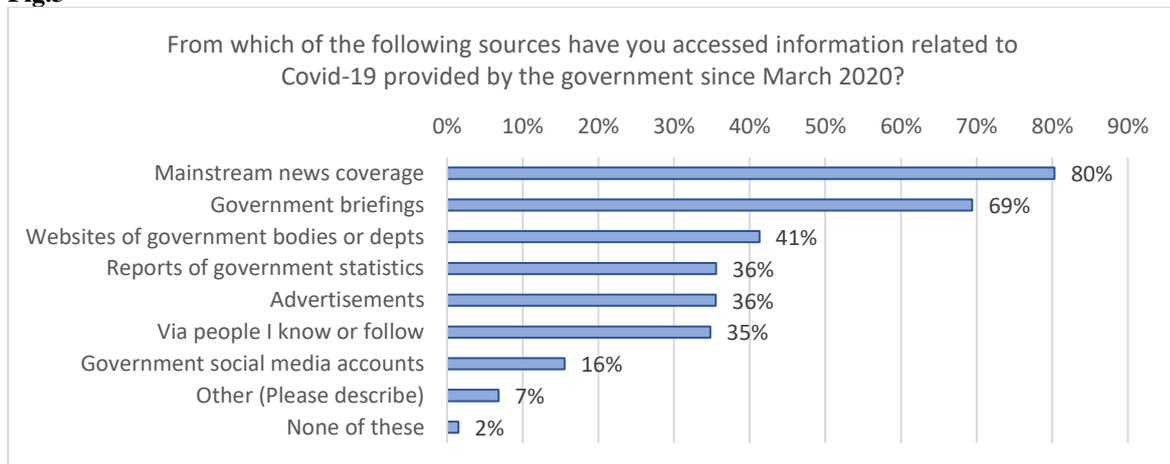


Between these two time periods the proportion of people finding out the latest government information about Covid-19 ‘less than once a week’ rose by 17 percentage points.

Again, this change appears to have been larger for younger people with the proportion of people aged 18-29 finding out the latest government information about Covid-19 less than once a week increasing by 32 percentage points, compared to 9 percentage points for people aged 50 or older. (Table 2)

- People had high engagement with government sources of Covid-19 information overall:

Fig.3



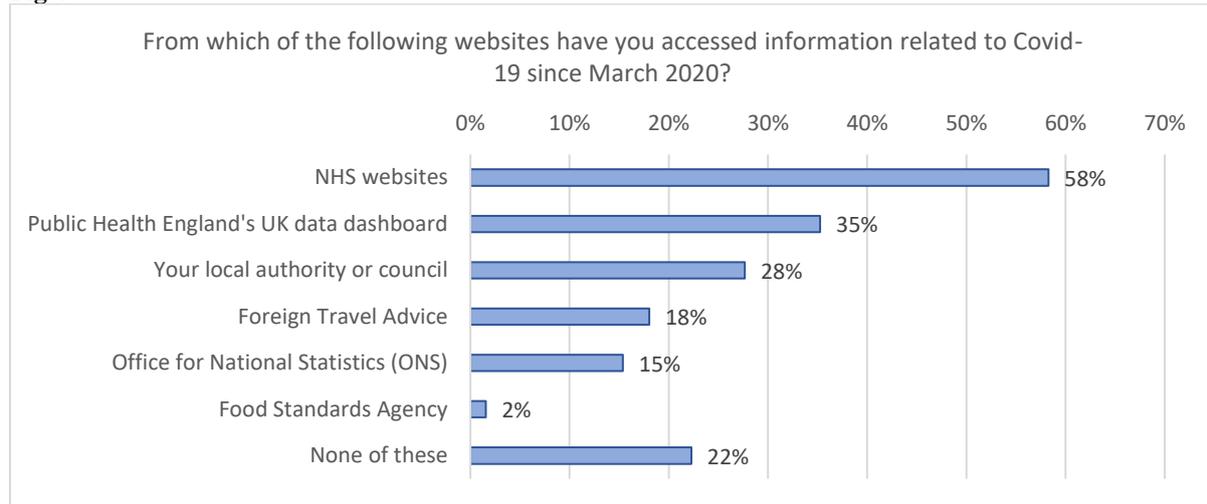
When analysed by age group, we find younger people were more likely to have accessed Covid-19 information ‘via people they know or follow’: 59% of 18-29 year-olds compared to 40% of people aged 30 to 49 and 23% of people aged 50 or older. (Table 3)

When analysed by qualification, we find (Table 4):

- 56% of respondents with degrees accessed ‘websites of government bodies or departments’ compared to 18% of respondents with no qualifications

- The difference is smaller for ‘reports of government statistics’: 43% of respondents with degrees accessed these compared to 24% of respondents with no qualifications
- Narrowing the source of information to websites, we find 58% of respondents had accessed ‘NHS websites’ and a surprisingly high number reporting they had accessed government statistics sites: 35% of respondents had accessed ‘Public Health England’s data dashboard’; 15% of respondents had accessed the ‘ONS website’

Fig.4



When analysed by qualification, we find (Table 6):

- 23% of respondents with degrees accessed the ‘ONS website’ compared to 8% of respondents with no qualifications
- 41% of respondents with degrees accessed the ‘Public Health England data dashboard’ compared to 25% of respondents with no qualifications

The full results of the survey are being analysed and will be published with the report of the **What Counts?** scoping inquiry. Alongside NatCen’s national survey, preparations for the inquiry include interviews with people around the UK providing facilities and services and those faced with decisions in a wide range of settings and communities about risks and trade-offs to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and assess government reasoning.

Tracey Brown, director of Sense about Science, said: *Society is not central government plus everyone else. It’s made up of many types of government, facilities and businesses, and hundreds of thousands of people making judgements and decisions, many of which have involved understanding the evidence, reasoning and robustness of government statements. It’s important that we use this opportunity – and that any official inquiry uses the opportunity – to ask how that went and what is needed in national deliberations about evidence and policy decisions. What Counts? is open to everyone until the end of January to add their experience to the research, survey and interviews. We will be reporting in early Spring.*

Guy Goodwin, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Social Research, said: *As the pandemic continues, it’s vitally important we understand people’s experiences of, and*

interactions with, government information on Covid-19. This research and the ‘What Counts?’ inquiry provide evidence that can help shape effective government communications during the pandemic. Crucially, this can support people across society to make sound decisions during these changing times.

Anyone who wishes to contribute to the inquiry can write to Katie Jones Katie@senseaboutscience.org. For more information about the inquiry and survey contact Munkhbayar Elkins at Munkhbayar@senseaboutscience.org.

Note to editors

ⁱ The NatCen survey was conducted between 24th of September and 24th of October 2021 online and on the phone with 2563 individuals from the NatCen Panel. 3260 people were invited to take part via letter, email, text message and phone depending on their contact preferences, what information was available and how quickly they took part. The data is weighted to be representative of the UK adult (18+) population and the survey may be subject to potential sources of error.

Sense about Science is an independent charity that promotes the public interest in sound science and evidence. It is the co-author with the Institute for Government of the Transparency of Evidence Framework, whose principles are now captured in the Treasury green book for policy making. Sense about Science has led two transparency reviews of evidence used by government departments in 2016 and 2018.

Table 1: the percentage point change in awareness broken down by age group

Awareness	Age groups					
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Very aware	-30pp	-24pp	-22pp	-14pp	-20pp	-14pp
Quite aware	8pp	1pp	11pp	7pp	10pp	12pp
A little aware	23pp	10pp	10pp	7pp	11pp	2pp
Not at all aware	-1pp	2pp	2pp	0pp	0pp	0pp

Note: pp shows percentage point change between the first 6 months of the pandemic and since March 2021

Table 2: the percentage point change in frequency of information finding broken down by age group

Frequency	Age groups					
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Several times a day	-21pp	-15pp	-19pp	-19pp	-18pp	-4pp
Once a day	-25pp	-17pp	-13pp	-15pp	-13pp	-11pp
Once a week or more, but less than once a day	13pp	11pp	15pp	21pp	21pp	10pp
Less than once a week	32pp	24pp	18pp	11pp	11pp	6pp
Not applicable – I did not do this	0pp	-2pp	0pp	1pp	1pp	-1pp

Note: pp shows percentage point change between the first 6 months of the pandemic and since March 2021

Table 3: information sources broken down by age group

Sources for information	Age groups					
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Mainstream news coverage	80%	70%	78%	78%	86%	90%
Government briefings	61%	57%	69%	72%	76%	82%
Websites of government bodies or depts	50%	51%	45%	45%	33%	23%
Reports of government statistics	44%	34%	31%	36%	32%	34%
Advertisements	43%	31%	32%	33%	34%	38%

Via people I know or follow	59%	42%	38%	25%	21%	22%
Government social media accounts	25%	21%	14%	12%	12%	9%
Other (Please describe)	5%	7%	7%	8%	9%	6%
None of these	1%	5%	2%	1%	0%	0%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	229	355	438	488	511	534

Table 4: information sources broken down by qualification

Sources for information	Qualification			
	Degree	A-levels	below A-levels	No qualifications
Mainstream news coverage	82%	77%	83%	75%
Government briefings	71%	64%	75%	65%
Websites of government bodies or depts	56%	41%	26%	18%
Reports of government statistics	43%	38%	28%	24%
Advertisements	33%	40%	37%	37%
Via people I know or follow	39%	42%	27%	24%
Government social media accounts	16%	21%	11%	16%
Other (Please describe)	8%	8%	3%	6%
None of these	1%	1%	2%	1%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1264	446	496	251

Table 5: website sources broken down by age group

Websites	Age groups					
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
NHS websites	73%	65%	66%	60%	53%	30%
Public Health England's UK data dashboard	40%	36%	34%	36%	35%	31%
Your local authority or council	19%	31%	35%	28%	30%	25%
Foreign Travel Advice	24%	18%	19%	18%	19%	9%
Office for National Statistics (ONS)	21%	15%	14%	16%	15%	11%
Food Standards Agency	1%	1%	3%	1%	2%	1%
None of these	15%	16%	18%	19%	25%	42%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	229	356	436	488	510	533

Table 6: website sources broken down by qualification

Websites	Qualification			
	Degree	A-levels	Below A-levels	No qualifications
NHS websites	67%	63%	53%	38%
Public Health England's UK data dashboard	41%	36%	27%	25%
Your local authority or council	31%	30%	23%	20%
Foreign Travel Advice	26%	19%	9%	7%
Office for National Statistics (ONS)	23%	13%	8%	8%
Food Standards Agency	1%	2%	1%	2%
None of these	13%	19%	28%	43%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1263	446	495	251