



Biotechnology and Biological Sciences

Research Council

Communication Capability Review

Summary Report

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Prepared by:	Policy & Capability team, Prime Minister's Office & Cabinet Office







1. Management summary

About the review

- 1.1. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) Communication Capability Review is one of a series of reviews across Whitehall departments, arm's length bodies and agencies. The review fieldwork took place in January.

Organisational context

- 1.2. BBSRC invests around £500m a year in research, people, capabilities and infrastructure to lead the bioscience research sector in realising its potential to deliver growth and wellbeing for the UK and beyond. BBSRC supports innovation across many sectors and encourages public engagement with and the communication of science in general and bioscience in particular. It works closely with eight strategically funded institutes and with universities, industry and civil society partners across the UK.

Role for communications

- 1.3. BBSRC Communications and Engagement programmes aim to secure and maintain the best possible environment for the UK bioscience community to undertake research. BBSRC communications creates advocates and supporters by raising awareness of BBSRC, BBSRC research, its impact and relevance.

Positive findings

- 1.4. The review panel was impressed with the communications team and with the Head of Communications and his senior leadership team in particular. The team is widely regarded as high performing, well-organised and focused with a strong commitment to the business aims and objectives of BBSRC. The communications team benefits greatly from the development of new skills particularly in the application of social media and from the support of the Chief Executive.

Areas for improvement

- 1.5. The panel recognised that the BBSRC communications team would benefit from a closer working relationship with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and that both continue to work together to gain a better understanding of each other's requirements. There is also a need for a more strategic approach to succession planning within the communications team. The team is well qualified and experienced, making them attractive to other employers.

Recommendations

- 1.6. The review panel's main recommendations are to:





- strengthen the succession plan for the communications team as a business risk and develop and agree a succession plan by BBSRC's senior executive team; and
- produce a strategy for developing new audiences.





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2. Background to the review





- 2.1. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) Communication Capability Review is one of a series of reviews across Whitehall departments, arm's length bodies and agencies. The review fieldwork took place in January 2015 alongside reviews of the other six Research Councils (RCs).
- 2.2. Each review is carried out by a combination of peer and external reviewers; this mini-review was conducted by Arthur Leathley, Director of Cross Government Communications in the Cabinet Office. He was supported by Karen Hetherington, Head of Communications for Flood and Coastal Risk Management in the Environment Agency. The review methodology is based on interviews, workshops and examination of supplied materials. The reviewer evaluates capability against business requirements using a framework. This report contains their qualitative assessment of capability and provides recommendations for improvement.
- 2.3. Communication is a pan-organisational responsibility. The review's scope covered the breadth of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division.
- 2.4. To accompany this short report, the Government Communication Service (GCS) will also publish an over-arching summary review, looking at the collective communication capability of the Research Councils. Its conclusions do not necessarily fit directly with those of this report: a business unit-specific assessment will not always mirror a wider corporate level one.
- 2.5. The review team interviewed 24 people in a combination of face-to-face, telephone interviews and a workshop. Interviewees included BBSRC's communications staff, BBSRC's senior executive directors and key internal stakeholders including a member of BBSRC's Council. External stakeholders interviewed included a Chief Executive from a science reporting NGO, the Chief Executive from a learned society, a director from a research centre supported by BBSRC and a BBC producer.

BBSRC: organisational context

BBSRC Background

- 2.6. BBSRC was formed in 1994, by a merger of the former Agricultural and Food Research Council and the biology programmes of the Science and Engineering Research Council, following the Government White Paper *Realising our Potential*. The Agricultural and Food Research Council could trace its origins back to 1931.
- 2.7. Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2014, BBSRC has developed a unique and central place in supporting the UK's world-leading position in bioscience. It has invested in research and training in universities and strategically supported institutes to 'further scientific knowledge, promote economic growth, wealth and job creation, and improve quality of life in the UK and beyond.' Over 20 years BBSRC has:
Funded over £5.5Bn of bioscience research





Supported over 15,000 research projects

Supported 8,200 unique bioscientists through research grants

Supported over 130 different research organisations with funding

- 2.8. In addition to funding research in the strategic priorities of agriculture and food security, industrial biotechnology and bioenergy, and bioscience for health, BBSRC continues to fund curiosity-led research to advance world-class bioscience across BBSRC's remit.
- 2.9. Highlights from the past twenty years include the first mammal to be cloned ('Dolly the sheep'), the identification of the link between BSE and CJD, the sequencing of the first complete plant genome, the development of stay green lawn grass, the launching of the Global Food Security Programme and, more recently, the launching of networks for industrial bioenergy and biotechnology.
- 2.10. BBSRC has just launched its refreshed strategic plan, *The Age of Bioscience* within which the BBSRC mission statement reads "*We cannot achieve our vision for UK bioscience alone*".

Leadership

- 2.11. BBSRC's Chief Executive has a management group of seven executive directors. BBSRC's governing body is its Council. The council comprises the Chair, the Chief Executive and 17 other members, at least half of whom are appointed for their qualification in science and engineering. Users of research, in Government and industry, are also represented. Members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Structures

- 2.12. As at April 2014 BBSRC provides strategic funding for eight institutes, seven of which are based at five BBSRC-supported UK Research and Innovation campuses. Together the five research and innovation campuses make a key contribution to the UK innovation ecosystem. In addition BBSRC established and works closely with number of specialist centres and networks. Current centres and networks include:
 - multi-disciplinary Synthetic Biology Research Centres (SRBCs), funded with EPSRC
 - Networks in Industrial Biotechnology and Bioenergy (BBSRC)

Implications of context on communications

- 2.13. The complexity and challenges of the high profile and potentially contentious research environment BBSRC operates in - for bioscience research in particular e.g. new approaches such as Synthetic Biology – means that BBSRC's communications and engagement operation has to be performing at its best at all times. Having a dedicated communications team that works alongside its funded scientists on a daily basis is seen as essential by the council.

3. Communications organisation





Leadership and direction setting

- 3.1. All BBSRC communications and engagement (with the exception of internal communications) are managed by the External Relations team which sits within the Communications and Information Management Group.
- 3.2. The Executive Director who leads the Communications and Information Management Group is part of the Council's Executive Group. The Communications and Engagement Strategy is developed by the External Relations leadership with input from the Executive Group, Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel, Council and other stakeholders. The Executive Group, agrees and sets the Strategy to support the corporate strategy of the BBSRC – and both of which are agreed and signed off by Council.
- 3.3. This External Relations team in turn provides the professional expert centre for communications across BBSRC and networks with the other research councils, RCUK, BIS and other government departments and a wide range of external UK and international partners including business.

The role of communications for BBSRC

The role of communications, as defined by their latest *Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy (2015-2017)* is to 'secure and maintain the best possible environment for the UK bioscience community to undertake research and to realise the potential of bioscience to deliver economic growth, wellbeing and improved quality of life in the UK and beyond.'

- 3.4. This will be achieved through raising awareness of BBSRC, BBSRC research, its impact and relevance with the aim of creating advocates and supporters and through building and maintaining trust with stakeholders, including the public, by being open, transparent and by considering a diversity of views in strategic decision making. These aims are delivered through the following principles:
 - Delivery led through the External Relations Unit as a professional 'centre' working in collaboration with and supporting the activities of the entire organisation, community and industry partners.
 - Maintenance of developed channels and programmes as outlined in the full 2012 strategy, including media relations, website, corporate events programme and commitment to strategic dialogue.
 - Openness and transparency in all BBSRC activities and programmes and a willingness to engage and respond to all viewpoints.
 - Targeting and tailoring of channels and mechanisms to meet audience needs and expectations – based on learning from the stakeholder benchmarking.
 - Leveraging previous 'investment' to increase effectiveness and reach, specifically through building long-term relationships with consumer media and developing social media platforms.
 - Working across RCUK to deliver effective and efficient communications and engagement programmes and capabilities that are mutually beneficial to BBSRC, other Councils and the wider research base.





- Develop and strengthen partnership approaches to delivering communications and engagement objectives, including through existing and new relationships with the Institutes, Society of Biology, Science Media Centre, Natural History Museum and Forum for the Future.

- 3.5. It has a remit to manage relationships with corporate external stakeholders, including the public.
- 3.6. The team is responsible for making sure that diverse stakeholder perspectives are considered in strategic decision making and this is a central role for the independent Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel which the team convenes and provides secretariat for.

BBSRC communications and engagement team

- 3.7. BBSRC has a communications and engagement team of 15 FTEs which includes three public engagement posts and roles predominantly involved in policy development. They are led by Associate Director, Communications and External Relations (the Head of Communications) and senior leadership team made up of a Head of News, Head of Engagement and Head of Digital Communications and an External Relations Coordination Manager responsible for administrative management and cross-organisational communications coordination and support.
- 3.8. The team is based in Swindon and has a total budget of just over £1m for communications (including all staff across all roles, including public engagement) and £300k for public engagement. BBSRC also makes a proportional contribution to RCUK joint public engagement programmes and contributes resource and budget to cross-Research Council projects on a case-by-case basis. BBSRC has a highly experienced team able to manage the high profiles issues attached to bioscience and biotechnology.

4. Findings

Summary

- 4.1. Communications and the BBSRC communications team are successful, well recognised, supported and respected across BBSRC Council members, the executive leadership team





and a wide range of business functions. This was also reflected in the comments and feedback from all the external stakeholders that were interviewed.

- 4.2. The BBSRC has just launched its latest Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy (2015-2017) following shortly after its refreshed strategic plan, *The Age of Bioscience* clearly aligning communications aims and objectives alongside the organisational ones.
- 4.3. The Head of Communications, alongside the senior leadership team, runs a highly-organised and focused communications team with a strong understanding of, and commitment to, the business aims and objectives of BBSRC.
- 4.4. The success and the level of qualifications of team members do make them attractive to other employers and succession planning is of critical importance to the ongoing success of communications in BBSRC.

Positive areas

Strategy and planning

- 4.5. BBSRC has a very clear, well-presented communications and engagement strategy that benefits further from a strong alignment with BBSRC's latest strategic plan.
- 4.6. Good connection with Council leadership. The Communications team worked closely with the Council to produce the communications and engagement strategy.
- 4.7. There is clear trust of the communications team by senior internal leaders and external stakeholders, and this came through strongly in interviews.
- 4.8. Communications colleagues are regarded as 'trusted advisers' in reflecting external views i.e. strategic use of public dialogue and engagement on the wider public concern about science (research) particularly around synthetic biology.
- 4.9. There is very good awareness and management of sensitive and usually high profile issues.
- 4.10. There are clear signs that the communications team is delivering the BBSRC's business strategy and plan, and the first steps are being taken to implement the new communications strategy.
- 4.11. A strong sign of BBSRC's confidence is that it has recently commissioned Corporate Stakeholder Benchmarking Research (Ipsos MORI 2014), which will help in developing close relationships with key external audiences. The survey showed that understanding among the BBSRC's stakeholders of the council's role is strong and that it is widely perceived to be an organisation that was performing well.

People and resources

- 4.12. The team is well led, motivated, innovative and enthusiastic. The reviewers noted a strong sense of purpose and confidence, complemented by clear support and recognition from executive leaders.





- 4.13. There is a clear focus on learning and development. “Learning and development here is brilliant” (team member workshop). There is a wide range of communications and communications-related qualifications across the team with several members working towards a second degree or masters. The majority of the team are also members of CIPR (Chartered Institute of Public Relations) or STMPRA (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine Public Relations Association).
- 4.14. The team has access to digital technology and indicates good deployment of digital communications.

Implementation

- 4.15. The communications team aims to build evaluation into all campaigns and projects. The team’s media (including new media) planning and execution is exemplar helping to develop new audience reach. It was noted that considerable effort has been on the twin-track approach of targeting consumer media (e.g. One Show, Countryfile) and focused trade (New Scientist, Nature, Farmers Weekly) The team is able to monitor impact and influence through strong media analysis and continuous client and stakeholder feedback. The latest Corporate Stakeholder Benchmarking Research (Ipsos MORI 2014) was a combination of an online survey with 383 completed surveys and qualitative research through 30 in-depth interviews.
- 4.16. Good and regular engagement was noted with the Bioscience for Society panel. This is demonstrated by the communications team’s shared view/purpose (alongside the Bioscience for Society panel members) as well as productive involvement in other council panels and networks.
- 4.17. Reviewers recognised an innovative and strategic use of digital and social media engagement. The early evaluation approach is good and the team are keen to share their learning with fellow council members. The team has already worked with BIS in this area.
- 4.18. Reviewers heard of strong reporting on delivery. Timely, effective, proactive communications plans are being produced for focused audience segmentation.
- 4.19. There are promising signs of getting assessment and evaluation into the culture of the team and the organisation. The Head of Communications identified that “the evaluation work the communications team initiates and captures is now being shared more widely and feeds in regularly to the BBSRC’s business planning process”.

Areas for improvement

Strategy and planning





- 4.20. The communications team would benefit from a closer working relationship with the communications and engagement teams in the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) to support a shared understanding of Government and Council demands and priorities to inform future communications planning and delivery. This is the responsibility of both the Department and the Research Council.
- 4.21. There is a general need to be able to demonstrate why certain communications strategies work and why others don't. Being able to make the financial case for communications is an essential for the communications leadership team.
- 4.22. Again BBSRC's most recent Corporate Stakeholder Benchmarking Research (Ipsos MORI 2014) identified emerging themes that would be 'beneficial' for BBSRC to consider. The findings of the research suggest that addressing these points will help BBSRC to highlight its impact, build stakeholder relationships and maintain its strong position and reputation.' These include developing a better understanding of the needs, expectations and motivations of specific stakeholders; looking at the method and frequency in which BBSRC interacts with stakeholders; developing relationships with NGO and government and policy sectors; improving messaging around BBSRC's role in UK bioscience and the social and economic importance of this; and using stakeholder favourability and advocacy towards BBSRC. The benchmarking research findings have been used to inform the development of the latest communications and engagement strategy.
- 4.23. An area of communications for which this communications team is not responsible is internal communications. There doesn't appear to be a strong focus on dedicated internal communications, despite this being a key element in ensuring that external messaging is consistent. There is a staff engagement programme primarily around the staff survey and there is a network of staff ambassadors for key internal messages. This accountability sits with the Head of HR and managed with 0.5 FTE. This review could be an opportunity to revisit the scope and needs of larger internal communications approach and considering who is best placed to develop an internal communications strategy and take it forward. The reviewer observes at this point that internal communications is most successfully delivered when part of the wider communications portfolio.

People and resources

- 4.24. The communications team has recently lost two FTEs through voluntary redundancy although the Head of Communications believes that the impact of this on team performance and ability to delivery current strategy can be managed. As resource could potentially become stretched, it is important that business priorities to support needs are clearly identified and agreed by the Council.
- 4.25. Learning and Development has been widely used as a retention activity in addition to supporting business needs and individual development. As resource comes under





increasing pressure, the communications leadership team will need to assess the cost and benefits of learning and development work. Again being able to present the financial benefits of the Learning and Development programme is an essential business tool.

- 4.26. There needs to be a strategic approach to succession planning, building on existing work at a corporate level to identify future leaders and to take a BBSRC-wide approach towards talent management. The team is well qualified and has a wealth of experience in successfully managing issues of national and international importance. This combination of skills and experience makes them not only a high performing team for BBSRC but also an attractive one to other employers.

Implementation

- 4.27. The communications team has a clear role in developing new audiences for the work of the council. This is supported in the latest BBSRC Corporate Stakeholder Benchmarking Research (Ipsos MORI 2014) and should be an essential part of all the team's insight work going forward. There is evidence that the team is looking to work with new groups particularly around public dialogue e.g. the Forum for the Future working with Friends of the Earth and innovation in public science communication such as the Great British Bioscience Festival UK tour in which 20 exhibits participated and visited many locations across the UK. An expansion of this approach is needed to make clear that BBSRC is willing to engage with all relevant audiences, including those with opposing views. Obtaining the widest possible feedback will also help internal discussion and challenge over correct prioritisation of Council and communications activity.
- 4.28. The researcher community in particular has been identified as a primary audience that is demanding a more 'designed' approach as an audience.
- 4.29. The need for evaluation will only grow as the needs of assessment of communications impact against cost are recognised as worthwhile by all stakeholders. The team should plan to resource and embed this activity going forward.

5. Recommendations

There are six recommendations in this report.

- 5.1. **R1:** Strengthen and make more visible the communications team succession plan and agree on the approach needed for specialist communications recruitment i.e. how fast vacancies can be filled for frontline roles
- 5.2. **R2:** The communications team should focus attention on communications priorities for the organisation, making best use current resource and skills





- 5.3. **R3:** A review of current Learning and Development programme is needed – looking at how sustainable is it and how its impact can be measured across the organisation
- 5.4. **R4:** The team should produce a strategy for developing new audiences along the lines of recent innovations like the Great British Bioscience Festival and the partnership work of Forum for the Future with Friends of the Earth. The team should also develop a specific, horizon-scanning digital strategy to support new audiences.
- 5.5. **R5:** Putting in place a rigorous programme of assessment against cost for communications activities - with benchmarking against other similar organisations.
- 5.6. **R6:** There is need for a building a strong brand for internal communications within BBSRC or across all Councils. This review is an opportunity to explore and assess new approaches.

Actions

- 5.7. To achieve the outcomes intended by the report’s recommendations, the reviewer has suggested some specific actions for implementation in **six** and **twelve** months

Item	Action in six months	Action in 12 months
Communications strategy	communications team to focus on communications priorities from the 2015/17 strategy Review of current Learning and Development programme The team to develop a strategy for developing new audiences along the lines of recent innovations	Ensure stakeholder opinion of BBSRC is monitored Take action in response to stakeholder feedback Review successes and improvements in digital, stakeholder and media communication
Internal communications	Review the internal communications needs of the council Ensure that internal communications work is linked to external objectives	Develop strong internal communications strategy, possibly in line with other councils
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More visible succession planning and an agreed approach needed on recruitment • rigorous programme of assessment against cost for communications activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to assess the impact of communication activity to ensure best value is being achieved

