Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

Communication Capability Review

Summary Report
1. Management summary

About the review
1.1. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 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 six other Research Councils (RCs).

Organisational context
1.2. The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government. It’s the UK’s largest funder of social and economic research, and supports the development and training of the UK’s future social scientists.

Role for communications
1.3 Communicating ESRC’s research and its impact, and disseminating knowledge is integral to the ESRC’s mission. A current priority for ESRC communications is to make the case for the sustained funding of the social sciences. The ESRC, as with the other RCs, is obliged by Royal Charter to engage the wider public with research.

Positive Findings
1.4 The review panel were impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm of the communications team, who are multi-skilled and ably cover a broad range of research topics, and are well thought of by their peers and stakeholders. There is a strong mix and leverage of channels used, and the panel recognised some real strengths within the implementation of the external communications strategy notably in the use of social media and media relations

Room for improvement
1.5 The panel felt that external communications needed to feature more visibly at Executive Board level, with more consultation around the strategic direction and priorities of communications. There also needs to be more clarity on audience segmentation and a greater focus on evaluation, linking KPIs with business priorities.

1.6 Accountability for internal communications also needs to be strengthened, along with deeper consultation and integration of communications across ESRC.

Recommendations
1.7 The review panel recommended:
- Greater visibility and consultation of the communications strategy at Board level with more input and representation of communications by the Director of Policy, Resources and Communications
- An impact assessment as part of a review of ESRC’s reputation
- A decision around the use of the ESRC brand – whether as an enabler for others’ achievements, or in its own right
- An internal communications strategy to be developed and accountability for its delivery led at Board level and within the Communications function.
A clear steer from the Board around prioritising audiences, to feed through into the strategic communications priorities, as the new communications strategy is developed.
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2 Background to the review

2.1 The Economic and Social Research Council 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 six other Research Councils.

2.2 Each review is carried out by a combination of peer and external reviewers; this mini-review was conducted by Maxine Taylor, Director, International and UK External Relations at King’s College London. Maxine was supported by Poli Stuart-Lacey, Head of Communications for Benefits and Credits, HM Revenue and Customs. The review methodology is based on interviews, workshops and examination of supplied materials. The reviewer evaluates capability against business requirements using a framework (details here). 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 ESRC’s external and internal communication, and is not limited to the work undertaken by its communications team. The review programme has also included public engagement within the scope of communications.

2.4 The review team interviewed a broad range of people in a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviewees included ESRC’s communications staff, Chief Executive and Director of Strategy, Resources and Communication. External stakeholders included the Head of PR for Institute for Fiscal Studies; Chief Executive for the Scottish Parliament; former Director for the ESRC-led Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, and the Head of Policy at the Academy of Social Sciences.

ESRC: Organisational context

ESRC Background

2.5 The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by the Government (through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). It is the UK’s largest funder of social and economic research, supports the development and training of the UK’s future social scientists and also funds major studies that provide the infrastructure for research. ESRC-funded research informs policymakers and practitioners and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective.

2.6 The ESRC spends approximately £212 million on research and training and supports 5,800 researchers and students, and has around 130 staff. The ESRC also works collaboratively with six other UK research councils, RCUK and Innovate UK to fund cross-disciplinary research and innovation addressing major societal challenges. The ESRC Strategic Plan 2015 (Published 14 January 2015) sets the principles for how ESRC plan to work over the coming period
2.7 Major challenges for 2015 will be:
- The comprehensive spending review in 2015; a priority will be making the case for the sciences and social sciences
- Maintaining engagement with the academic community
- Prioritising relationships and partnerships with government departments
- Improving stakeholder engagement

Leadership
2.8 ESRC appointed a new Chief Executive in October 2014 who is responsible for the implementation of policies and decisions, and overall management of the ESRC Office. She is supported by an executive management board of two Directors and two Deputy Directors. The ESRC Council is the senior decision-making body and is made up of members from business, civil society and the public sector, as well as representatives from the academic community.

Structure
2.9 There are two ESRC directorates: Policy, Resources and Communications, and Research, Partnerships and International. Unlike some of the other Research Councils, the ESRC does not sponsor or own other sites or institutes, and is fully based in Swindon.

2.10 ESRC works with a range of partners. This activity includes: engagement and co-funding of activity with business, public and third sector organisations; collaboration with other funders (in the UK and overseas), including the other research councils and Innovate UK; engagement and partnership with universities, as well as other research organisations and learned societies.

2.11 ESRC provides leadership, support and investment for social science via four main areas of activity:
- Fostering research and innovation
- Creating and maximising data infrastructure for research
- Building capability
- Facilitating partnerships and realising impact.

Collaboration
2.12 ESRC works across Business, third and public sector organisations, building partnerships and working collaboratively in a range of ways. Examples of their collaborative activity include:
- developing strategic partnerships with organisations for maximum impact;
- working with partner organisations to develop and fund major research and capacity-building initiatives;
- encouraging direct collaboration between social scientists and other individuals; and organisations.
2.13 Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) are one of the biggest schemes ESRC funds as part of their commitment to knowledge exchange. The KTP scheme’s mission is to strengthen the UK’s competitiveness and wealth creation by enabling research organisations to apply their research knowledge to important business problems.

Implications of context for communications

2.14 ESRC has a ‘holding’ communications strategy in place for 2014-15, setting out work priorities and channels, while a new strategic plan is developed.

2.15 The new Strategic Plan 2015 will inform the next External Communications Strategy, particularly around ESRC’s leadership role. ESRC ran a full public consultation, where stakeholders and other interested parties were invited to comment on the future strategic direction of the Council, and this feedback was incorporated into the new Plan. This was part of a wider conversation seeking input from across the ESRC’s communities, both within and outside academia.
3 Communications organisation

Leadership and direction setting

3.1 The Communications team sits within the Policy, Resources and Communications Directorate and the Head of Communications reports to the Director, who represents the function at Board level. It leads on all aspects of communications, public engagement and public affairs, including strategy, brand and reputation, digital communications, media engagement, publishing, social media and science communication.

3.2 Their role is to support the Council’s duty as set out in the Royal Charter, support the ESRC business objectives, and protect the ESRC’s reputation. The leadership of ESRC believe that communications has a pivotal role to play in making the case for public funding of the UK research base as a whole, helping to demonstrate the link of their work to sustainable growth, increased effectiveness of public services and policy, and the quality of life.

3.3 The development of a new communications strategy will begin in spring 2015 following the publication of the Strategic Plan, and will involve consultation with senior management, internal partners and stakeholders and a benchmarking exercise. It will also take insight from the strategic plan consultation. The development of a new communications strategy will be discussed at the ESRC Council in July 2015 with a full draft approved by the end of 2015.

The role of communications for ESRC

3.4 Communications in ESRC is defined as engagement with all of the ESRC’s key audiences, using a wide variety of channels including media, public affairs, digital communications and the internet, events, marketing materials and publications.

3.5 Their External Communications Strategy defines the ‘impact’ they strive for as being both scientific impact, which contributes to the advancement of social science and other disciplines, and economic and social impacts which contribute to changes that benefit individuals, organisations and nations.

3.6 ESRC describes the core functions of its communications activity as being to:
   • Enhance communication with academics, policymakers and partners
   • Promote awareness and engagement with the public
   • Promote and generate impact to inform policy
   • Enhance ESRC’s reputation and that of the social sciences
   • Give ESRC a stronger ‘voice’, leadership presence and to be perceived as an open, approachable and communicative organisation.

3.7 ESRC’s holding External Communications Strategy (2014-15) sets out a “new targeted approach and dedication of resources to more effective activity, as we establish a strong
leadership role for ESRC and move to a more challenging era of communications delivery with the continued development of new technologies and social media."

3.8 As part of this new approach, one of the things that the Communications team plans to stop doing for 2014/15 is to develop “any targeted activities to business or the third sector (our present materials are produced to appeal to and be appropriate for a broad range of users).” Moving forward, ESRC’s communication will focus on influencing the business community as well as the public and third sectors, reflecting the priorities set out new Strategy Plan 2015. This highlighted an area for discussion and deliberation for the Board and Communications team.

3.9 In 2010, a Communications Benchmarking Review was carried out for ESRC. While broadly positive, some of the areas highlighted where ESRC’s key communications messages were not reaching wider audiences included: a perception of ESRC being a ‘quiet’ organisation; hard to understand for those unfamiliar with its work; a website which was seen as ‘impenetrable’ and a significant barrier to engagement, and a lack clarity around ESRC’s definitions of impact. The panel conducting this review recognised elements of those findings as still being relevant and were encouraged to see a review of those findings is planned to inform the next communications strategy. ESRC could consider using its own Evaluation team to conduct this work.

Public Engagement

3.10 ESRC’s public engagement is embedded and delivered across the ESRC teams, but led by Communications. While there is a clear focus on fulfilling the Royal Charter commitment around public engagement within ESRC, it is not explicit within the Strategic Plan or holding communications strategy what level of engagement that requires. In addition, the communications team delivers two high-profile activities – the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences and the ESRC photographic competition. They also host the social science for schools web content and Twitter account. A key public engagement focus for this year is ESRC’s 50th anniversary.

Internal communications

3.11 ESRC’s internal communications are embedded across the organisation; overall responsibility is also with the Director of Policy, Resources and Communications, although this is not clearly understood or set out, internally. There is no ring-fenced resource within the communications team to lead internal communications. Main channels for internal communications are the ESRC Intranet (not seen by the panel), monthly all-staff seminars and all-staff emails. These channels are used without a central co-ordination of activity or approach. The panel noted that this was an area of communications consistently highlighted as needing improvement and resourced.

ESRC’s communications team

3.12 The Communications Team sits within the Policy, Resources and Communications Directorate and the Head of Communications reports to the Director. It leads on all
aspects of communications, public engagement and public affairs, including strategy, 
brand and reputation, digital communications, press, publishing, social media and science 
communication.

3.13 ESRC has a communications team of 13.03 FTE or 14 headcount, and is based entirely in 
Swindon. The team has a wide range of experience and skills and includes expertise in 
strategy, branding, press and media relations, publishing, editing, science writing, design, 
digital content and event management.

3.14 The Head of Communications manages the Impact, Promotion and Engagement budget 
and the Corporate Communications budget of £1.35 million (excluding staff costs), which 
covers, along with communications and public engagement activities, technical support 
and hosting of the ESRC website and support for key research investments. The 
communications and public engagement element is £565,000. The pay bill for 2014-15 was 
£426,000.

3.15 ESRC’s Communications is embedded across ESRC activities, and the communications 
team works closely with the Evaluation, Strategy and Analysis Team and the Knowledge 
Exchange Group. The team also works closely with programme teams on major research 
investments and key projects. The review panel were aware there was still some overlap in 
activity however, despite shared horizon-scanning activity, and some gaps in timely 
communication on some projects.

3.16 The team works closely with RCUK and the other research councils, joining up activities 
where appropriate to maximise the impact of research, to deliver economies of scale and 
efficiencies across all communications activities. For example, in early 2014 all councils 
began the transition to a common web software platform supported by a joint unit, to be 
completed in 2015 (ESRC are the last Council to migrate their content to this new 
platform).

3.17 The Heads of Communications from all councils meet monthly as the Communications 
Strategic Advisory Network to monitor proposed activity, and provide advice to chief 
executives on options for enhanced joint working, efficiencies and forward planning.
4 Findings

Summary

4.1 The review panel were impressed with the enthusiasm of the communications team, who were positive, engaged and supportive of one another. There was a strong respect within the team for the Head of Communications, who has worked in ESRC Communications team for 24 years, and as its Head for the last five.

4.2 The panel recognised that there is a wide mix of skills and experience on the team, and noted that the media team is particularly well thought of within the team by those questioned.

4.3 The new Chief Executive champions the importance of communications in supporting ESRC to deliver its priorities. The panel were encouraged by her enthusiasm for bringing a sharper focus to the consideration of communications priorities and activity at Board level.

4.4 The Director of Policy, Resources and Communications has a wide brief which places multiple demands on his time. The panel recognized that while the Head of Communications and the Director hold monthly meetings, and the Head of Communications does present to the Executive Board, the panel felt it would be helpful for there to be greater proactive senior leadership of the communications strategy and accountability by the Board for its outcomes.

4.5 The panel welcomed the plan to undertake a consultation process and further benchmarking exercise to inform the next communications strategy, and feels a thorough refresh of the audit of audience and stakeholders would benefit ESRC in terms of focusing resource effectively and to increase impact.

Positive areas

Strategy and planning

4.6 ESRC’s leadership is committed to the importance of communications and engagement to reach the Council’s target audiences and deliver its priorities and commitments. It sees the importance of influencing stakeholders to recognise the importance of economic and social science, and is supportive of the positive work the communications team does, and the impact it achieves.

4.7 ESRC has detailed communications strategies for each year, including the current ‘holding’ strategy. It takes seriously the need to support delivery of ESRC’s priorities across a range of channels and within the resources available. The communications team displays the communications strategy within the office so that there is clear alignment for each of the team’s work objectives with the wider direction of the ESRC. There is a
detailed list of target audiences in the 2011-14 communications strategy, which informed the communications approach. This needs to be replicated afresh for the next substantive strategy.

4.8 The Head of Communications is invited in to Directors’ meetings as and when required, and the team provides a quarterly update to the ESRC Council on progress against the key communications priorities. The flow of communication seems to be more directed to the Board than coming from the Board, in terms of strategic leadership of communications priorities and approach.

People and resources

4.9 The communications team are multi-skilled, and cover an extremely broad range of research issues, their grasp of which was singled out for praise. Within ESRC the team are seen as ‘trusted experts’ who consistently go the extra mile in terms of their input and outputs.

4.10 The team has reduced spend by bringing the design and production of their regular magazine, the annual report and the smaller publicity material in-house and by taking a digital by default stance on the majority of publications.

4.11 Overall resource levels within the communications team seem adequate for the size of the Council, and when compared with other Councils, reflecting the broad remit of work undertaken.

Implementation

4.12 The panel felt there was a really strong mix of channels and leverage of these for the purposes of public engagement; for example, ESRC’s public sector evidence briefings; the Festival of Social Science (with a broad reach across the UK through 200 different events); events like the recent launch of the new strategy and 50th anniversary plan, and Annual Photographic competition for young people. There was strong praise for the ‘can do’ attitude of the media team, and good relationships and contacts it has built with a range of, often, mainstream national journalists. The team offers media training to ensure there are enough talking heads available on hot issues, and work alongside research teams to ensure good practice in promoting their findings.

4.13 Digital communications has taken on more prominence and in the last year, ESRC’s Twitter following doubled to around 28,000. If pushed out to a wider group of ‘super-users’ there could be an amplified impact on social media coverage and interest.

4.14 ESRC publishes two main magazines: Society Now (three times per year) and Britain In, an annual magazine sold in a number of UK retail outlets and distributed freely to doctor surgeries and airport lounges. There is a clear pride in the team for these products and dedicated resource to managing their delivery, and praise for their quality and content from some of the stakeholders the panel talked to. The team is planning a readership
survey for Society Now and a full review of Britain In, which will help ESRC to understand
the perceived value and consider how this translates in terms of return on investment.

4.15 The team has clearly built up some positive stakeholder relationships, some clearly
operating more as professional ‘friends’ than stakeholders.

Areas for improvement

Strategy and planning

4.16 Reviewers heard from senior leaders about the importance placed on reputation
management, profile development and public engagement. In particular there was a clear
appetite to ensure communications priorities were truly strategic and agreed at Board level
to ensure maximum efficacy and impact. The panel felt encouraged by the new Chief
Executive’s commitment to supporting communications, but also recognised her
enthusiasm for honing resource and delivery in such a way as to deliver increased benefits
to ESRC.

4.17 While there is evidence of integration of communications within ESRC programmes and
teams, it also feels as if more integration and joint-working could be done to ensure teams
deliver efficiently and avoid duplication of effort and output. While the communications
strategy is visibly displayed, the reviewers felt a clear forward look with all events could be
shared and used as a way to prioritise resource and output.

4.18 The panel agreed that a thorough audit of stakeholders, as proposed by the ESRC, needed
to be conducted, in focusing across the public sector, business and the third sector
(including the international community). This could be conducted in partnership with the
Knowledge Exchange team for example. Also to continue to review products to ensure
that they remain the right products for the Council to invest in, in terms of the Council’s
priorities.

4.19 The panel felt that more emphasis on identifying and evaluating key performance
indicators would benefit the prioritisation of resource, and allow the Board to track and
influence communications delivery. Extending the evaluation to consider the real impact
of the communications activity could provide a richer insight into how to modify or
reposition channel, audience and content choice.

4.20 The issue of the ESRC ‘brand’ came up several times within the review, in particular the
question around whether to use it as an enabler, or in its own right, to raise awareness in
ESRC as an organisation. In terms of its equity, the brand speaks to quality and impartiality,
but there is a need for more clarity and decision around the use of and investment in the
brand itself. The Board needs to provide informed leadership on this issue.

People and resources

4.21 The team is adequately staffed for the size of the organisation; however the reviewers
felt there needed to be a review of the structure and grades across the team to ensure the
right level of resource is supporting the key priorities. The team has been affected by overlapping maternity leave, and has coped well, but could benefit from more in-depth succession and talent management discussions, with broader consideration of grading structure, developmental mobility and shared communications expertise hubs across the RCs.

4.22 Aligned with the reviewers’ recommendation that greater strategic insight is invested into the new communications strategy is the deployment of appropriate resource within the communications team; if necessary, reducing the breadth of approach to focus more intently on specific priority areas. In particular, reviewing the balance of targeted communication to priority user groups to ensure communications reflect the priority given in the Strategic Plan...

4.23 The panel felt that increased mobility and opportunity through moving staff around between the councils’ communications roles would add value and support the succession-planning of the wider group of councils. The panel also felt that pooling expertise more across the councils would be sensible to consider, given the pressure on resources and continued focus on the reducing the deficit. While there’s a clear benefit to retaining expertise within the communications team for each council, the benefit of centralising certain areas of communications, for example digital, publishing and to some extent media handling, could be a sensible way of sharing good practice, reducing duplication, investing in the wider of issue of RCUK and providing more development opportunities for existing staff.

Implementation

4.24 The panel recognised some real strengths within implementation of the external communications strategy. The key area for improvement is investing in an internal communications resource and approach – there is no overarching engagement strategy for ESRC’s staff, and no measurement of sentiment and personal/team engagement through use of the People Survey.

4.25 In terms of its social media policy, the panel felt the communications team now need to take the next step in terms of digital maturity and enable a wider group of users to post and tweet on behalf of ESRC. At present everything is directly controlled through the Communications team without any empowered ‘super-users’, which is not sustainable given the increased number of users over the last year, and the need to maintain the interest of this growing group of followers.

4.26 In order to take the team’s outputs and impact “from good to great”, reflecting comments from stakeholders, there needs to be a continuous review of priorities (linked to the strategic direction-setting from the Board) and of products, to determine whether these are still are still achieving the desired outcomes and are the right products to invest in.
4.27 Investing in and continually reviewing the style of writing to suit the intended audience was felt to be important, as was finding new ways to broaden the appeal and reach of the research outputs, outside of the academic and research communities.

4.28 The panel and the ESRC Comms team felt that the migration of content to the new web platform is a positive opportunity to clean up the content and focus of ESRC’s internet presence. At present there’s a lack of clarity about who the content is aimed at, and a difficulty to really understand what ESRC is promoting or offering. Some user-testing would be helpful on that front, including a diverse range of potential and existing users.
5 Recommendations

5.1 This report has seven main recommendations.

5.2 **R1:** There needs to be greater visibility and consultation of the external communications strategy at Executive Board level with an increased level of proactive input and representation of communications by the Director of Policy, Resources and Communications, including performance reporting.

5.3 **R2:** The panel agrees with the ESRC’s proposed to run a stakeholder audit to build on their last one, and also on their public consultation around their new Strategic Plan. The panel commends and endorses this as the right approach to take. This will help ESRC deliver a more strategic and targeted communications.

5.4 **R3:** ESRC has also proposed as part of the development of the communications strategy an impact assessment to understand which channels are most effective, which products should be retained or reviewed, and where any areas of weakness are. The panel endorses this approach.

5.5 **R4:** That ESRC decides what they want from their brand; whether it’s an enabler of others’ achievements, or an identity in its own right that is invested in and developed.

5.6 **R5:** An internal communications strategy is developed and accountability for its delivery led at Board level and from within the Communications function. This would include measuring levels of staff engagement by using the People Survey on an annual basis.

5.7 **R6:** A clear steer from the Board around audience prioritisation which needs to feed through into the strategic communications priorities, as the new communications strategy is developed.

5.8 **R7:** The panel agrees that, in line with the wider RCUK suggestion to consider centralising some communications functions, ESRC could potentially benefit from stronger and more stream-lined communications.

Actions

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

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Action in six months</th>
<th>Action in 12 months</th>
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<tr>
<td>Communications strategy</td>
<td>• The Board actively influences the new communications strategy</td>
<td>• A communications strategy is agreed, and regularly reviewed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Director of Policy, Resources and Communications provides a monthly performance-linked update to the Executive Board on communications</td>
<td>• Clear line of sight between Head of Communications and Board on strategic direction of ESRC and priorities for communications resource</td>
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| Stakeholder management | • The outcomes of the stakeholder audit are reflected within the new communications strategy and plan  
• A discussion and decision is made at Board level about the desired outcome for audience prioritisation, which is then reflected within the communications strategy | • Clear stakeholder engagement strategy in place, reflected in channel strategy  
• Annual review of stakeholder landscape.  
• Evaluation conducted and reported regularly across all priority stakeholder channels |
| Impact assessment/Reputation index | | • ESRC feeds in the outcome from its planned impact assessment with stakeholders |
| Brand management | • Board discusses issue of brand value and purpose, and agrees an approach | • Communications and public engagement reflect the Board’s decision around brand and identity, either boosting its own, or measuring impact via external parties |
| Internal communications | • A strategy is agreed and developed with the Board for engaging and communicating internally  
• Resource is ring-fenced to lead on this communication, from within the Communications team. | • The delivery of the strategy is underway with demonstrable value in terms of input and output  
• Activity is aligned across ESRC with no duplications and opportunities for more join-up across the organisation  
• ESRC engages its staff with the People Survey in 2015-16. |