



**Engineering and Physical Sciences  
Research Council  
Communication Capability Review  
Summary Report**





## 1. Management summary

### About the review

- 1.1 The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) 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 Investing around £800m a year in long-term, fundamental research and postgraduate training, EPSRC is the UK's main agency for funding research in engineering and physical sciences. It does not own research institutions and enables others to conduct research on behalf of the UK.

### Role for communications

- 1.3 While the entire EPSRC organisation takes responsibility for engagement and maintaining relationships with thousands of organisations, the Communications and Stakeholder Engagement (CSE) team is valued for its strategic role. The CSE aims to support the delivery of the EPSRC Strategic Plan, and build the reputation of EPSRC as a leading, professional and successful organisation.

### Positive findings

- 1.4 The CSE team is highly motivated, engaged and skilled. The quality of communications is valued within the organisation and the review panel was impressed with the strategic responsibility adopted by the CSE senior team, across disciplines, projects and themes.

### Areas for improvement

- 1.5 Although emergent capability exists, the CSE team and leadership are not fully embracing social media and digital platforms to engage more richly with audiences. While the academic community is prioritised as an audience, general public engagement is given limited attention and could benefit from further consideration. Importantly, with a greater emphasis and consistency across outcome-focused evaluation, CSE will fully understand, improve and demonstrate the value of engagement. Cross-council collaboration exists in pockets across RCUK communications, although this is limited in practice in terms of objectives, channels or across shared audiences.

### Recommendations

- 1.6 The review panel recommend:
- Devising, communicating and implementing a digital strategy to articulate and coordinate social media engagement and maximise effectiveness across digital platforms, as part of a comprehensive communications strategy;
  - Developing the communications strategy and approach to reflect general public engagement, global reputation, and collective ambitions of Research Councils' communications;
  - Building consistent evaluation and benchmarking within EPSRC communications.





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## 2. Background to the review

### Background

- 2.1 The Communication Capability Review of Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) is one of a series of reviews across Whitehall departments, Arm's Length Bodies and agencies. The review fieldwork took place in January 2015.
- 2.2 Each review is carried out by a combination of peer and external reviewers; this mini-review was conducted by Dee Cotgrove, Met Office Director of Communications. 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 EPSRC's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division.
- 2.4 The review team interviewed around 25 people in a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviewees included EPSRC's communications staff, 10 senior staff/directors and key stakeholders such as universities, learned societies, businesses and public organisations.

### *EPSRC: Organisational context*

- 2.5 EPSRC is the UK's main agency for funding research in engineering and physical sciences, employing around 230 staff in Swindon, including RCUK staff hosted by EPSRC. It does not own research institutions and enables others to conduct research on behalf of the UK.
- 2.6 EPSRC invests around £800m a year in long-term, fundamental research and postgraduate training. EPSRC has a wide portfolio with research ranging from physics, chemistry and mathematics to materials, computing and engineering. EPSRC supports over 7,000 students through 115 Centres for Doctoral Training, with additional students supported through the Doctoral Training Partnership and Industrial CASE.
- 2.7 Around 45 per cent of EPSRC's £2.5bn portfolio is collaborative with users (industry, charity and public sector organisations) and includes relationships with over 2,800 organisations, leveraging £830m in additional investment. EPSRC works closely with other Research Councils and public sector organisations, and has strong partnerships with 23 universities (those in receipt of 80 per cent of EPSRC's funding), around 28 strategic partners in industry (such as BT, BAE Systems and Dyson), partners in innovation (such as Innovate UK) and central Government departments (such as Business, Innovation and Skills, Transport, Health, and Defence).
- 2.8 EPSRC's vision is for the UK to be the best place in the world to research, discover and innovate. This is supported by two goals:





- Research and discover – For the UK to be positioned as an international leader, where discovery thrives and EPSRC support generates the highest quality research in engineering and physical sciences; and
- Research and innovate – For the UK's excellent research base and talented researchers to work with EPSRC to accelerate innovation for the benefit of society and the economy.

2.9 EPSRC has three strategies to achieve this vision:

- Balancing capability – To maintain the UK's reputation for excellence and keep it at the heart of global research and innovation;
- Building leadership – To nurture the next generation of skilled researchers and innovators and provide the knowledge and skills vital to a healthy, sustainable and prosperous society; and
- Accelerating impact – To support more extensive and rapid exploitation of research outcomes.

2.10 One of the biggest challenges EPSRC faces is the ongoing pressure on financial budgets. EPSRC comes under continual pressure to demonstrate return on investment, particularly when long-term projects are expected to last over several years.

### 3. Communications organisation

#### *Leadership and direction setting*

3.1 The entire EPSRC organisation takes responsibility for engagement and maintaining relationships with thousands of organisations. The Communications and Stakeholder Engagement (CSE) team is valued for its strategic role.

3.2 The Chief Operating Officer has responsibility for communications on the EPSRC Leadership Team, with the Head of CSE playing an active role to advise the Leadership Team and as a senior leader across the Research Council communications teams.

#### *The role of communications for EPSRC*

3.3 The CSE team works with EPSRC and the Leadership Team to develop the organisational strategy and policy.

3.4 The CSE team aims to deliver a communications strategy that supports EPSRC's aims and priorities:

- To support the delivery of the EPSRC Strategic Plan;
- To maintain EPSRC as a leading, professional and successful organisation and demonstrate the value of EPSRC's work;
- To ensure there is trust and confidence in EPSRC within the academic community and other key stakeholder groups.





3.5 In addition, the CSE takes a responsive role to mitigate reputational risk and supports core business of EPSRC by communicating funding opportunities and policy changes to relevant audiences.

### *EPSRC communications and stakeholder engagement team*

3.6 The CSE team is divided into four main functions with lead managers each reporting directly into the Head of CSE:

- Corporate Communications – Including events;
- Digital Services – Including digital design and editing, and publishing;
- Media relations – Including publications; and
- Stakeholder Engagement – Including parliamentary

3.7 In addition to heading up disciplines, the lead managers also take responsibility for segmented audiences, policy themes and individual projects. This new structure has been set up to enable the team to coordinate across a wide portfolio, avoid campaigns and strategies being devised in isolation and respond to large-scale projects at short notice.

3.8 The CSE team focuses on four main audiences:

- Delivery Partners – Such as Research Councils, academic researchers and universities;
- End Users – Such as industry and public sector bodies;
- Investors – Such as central Government and the general public (as taxpayers);
- Interest Groups – Such as business and academic groups.

3.9 The CSE team has a total headcount of 21 (made up of a 19.77 Full Time Equivalent), including one vacancy. The team includes a Year in Industry student as a fixed term appointment. Recent changes have been made to focus more attention on the engagement function and user experience across digital platforms. Previously the CSE team had responsibility for internal communications but this has now been devolved to the wider EPSRC projects, while retaining strategic advice on organisational internal communications. This was devolved as part of a programme to reduce FTE within communications, which included the merger of the events team that manages all programme delivery and communications events. Although the digital function currently lies in the CSE team, this has changed several times in recent years.

## **4. Findings**

### *Summary*

4.1 Overall the CSE team at EPSRC is a highly motivated, engaged and skilled team. Although it does not have a direct position on the Leadership Team, it has earned a strategic and respected position within EPSRC. This is largely due to previous experiences highlighting the importance of effective communications advice and input and the personal role taken by the CSE senior team to build internal relationships.





4.2 Communications aims are closely aligned with EPSRC strategy and the CSE team has proved effective at forming collegiate relationships (internal and external) to build advocacy for the work of EPSRC.

4.3 Efforts have been made to address gaps in the CSE team, particularly around engagement and user experience of digital services. Recent steps have also been taken to expand the digital service (a Growth Stories app and blog). However, EPSRC largely relies on traditional communications channels and may not have the best balance between disseminating information versus engaging with audiences through social media and other digital channels. The risk-averse nature of EPSRC seems to drive this cautionary use of social media, but CSE, along with the Leadership Team, needs to formulate its digital offer to internal and external audiences as part of an overall digital strategy.

### **Positive areas**

#### *Strategy and planning*

4.4 There is a clear and direct link between communications and the EPSRC strategy, which is essential with such a broad remit. The Leadership Team recognises and values the contribution of the CSE team in strategy formulation and delivery. Recent measures have been put in place, such as the CSE senior team taking responsibility for themes and projects, to ensure continuing and new work aligns with this overall strategic approach.

4.5 The CSE team has rightly prioritised efforts to build and support advocacy with academia and industry to meet several objectives and deliver the overall strategy. This is partly down to a coordinating role, but also through direct contact and relationship-building. This approach has been evidently successful.

4.6 A real strength of the CSE team is the collegiate approach to communicating big issues and projects (such as RISE and the CDT launch) across multiple communications disciplines. This maximises the broad skills and experience across individuals and within the team, and ensures the CSE team is involved from the earliest planning stages.

#### *People and resources*

4.7 Due to prioritisation and restructures, the CSE team has the necessary skills and resources to deliver against its objectives and to build on emerging competence in new areas, such as social media. In the future, CSE will need to decide if the current practice of commissioning freelance writers to supplement in-house resources is a long-term solution to compiling material for EPSRC.

#### *Implementation*

4.8 The quality of communications across disciplines and channels is praised by internal and external stakeholders. The Leadership Team recognises the strengths of the CSE team to translate complex research and policy into accessible language and messages, and to select appropriate channels.

### **Areas for improvement**

#### *Strategy and planning*





- 4.9 As the communications strategy is so intrinsically linked with EPSRC's strategy, there is a danger that general public engagement is deprioritised in favour of maintaining relationships with researchers and investors. Undoubtedly that is a key role for EPSRC, but the CSE team needs to decide if the balance is right and if that is where it adds best value. While concentrating on key aspects of the EPSRC strategy, more focus could be given to promoting the UK as a centre for research excellence on a global scale and with a general audience through mainstream channels, particularly as public awareness and engagement are key aspects of the Royal Charter.
- 4.10 The planning and strategic approach is largely confined to EPSRC, rather than across the Research Councils. Although that is partly a decision for the wider Research Councils, it is a consideration for the CSE team to maximise value and effectiveness.
- 4.11 One issue which is a constant hindrance is the EPSRC brand. While this is acknowledged and accepted by particular audiences, such as academic researchers, there is a general consensus that it acts against efforts to engage with a wider audience. This is a consideration for EPSRC as a whole, but the impact on communications needs to be addressed.

#### *People and resources*

- 4.12 While the communications functions largely adopt a strategic approach, the digital strand focuses much more on delivery, relying on other parts of EPSRC to set the lead on digital objectives. This results in largely a publishing role across digital channels, rather than a proactive plan to maximise these channels and reach and engage with new and existing audiences.
- 4.13 The CSE team tends to build evaluation into large-scale campaigns and projects rather than make it part of business as usual. Although limited by evaluation tools and access to metrics, the ambitions of evaluation focus largely on outputs rather than attempting to see the longer-term outcomes. There is also a tendency to measure for reporting, rather than to act as a comparison across agreed benchmarks to review and improve.

#### *Implementation*

- 4.14 The Leadership Team recognises the needs, albeit with a constrained budget, to do more around accessible digital content and has undertaken specific work in recent years to make the website a hub for the business community in addition to the academic community. However, the CSE team does not prioritise social media or digital channels as a way of communicating with new or existing audiences. As a result, EPSRC is in danger of failing to seize the opportunity offered by new channels and platforms to engage and understand audience, which is a key value of strategic communications.

## **5. Recommendations**

This report has four main recommendations:







5.1 **R1:** Develop the communications strategy to reflect potential general public engagement and global positioning of EPSRC.

5.2 **R2:** Develop the communications strategy to reflect the collective communications ambitions across the Research Councils.

5.3 **R3:** Build a process of consistent evaluation and benchmarking within EPSRC communications and contribute to this across the Research Councils.

5.4 **R4:** Devise, communicate and implement a digital strategy for EPSRC to articulate and coordinate social media engagement and maximise effectiveness of corporate digital platforms.

**Actions**

5.5 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define any communications objectives for public and global engagement including use of EPSRC/RCUK brand</li> <li>Support development of collective communications objectives and opportunities across Research Councils</li> <li>Develop an updated communications strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider need to restructure and reprioritise CSE team to reflect developed communication strategy</li> </ul>
Digital platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop digital strategy to reflect platforms and audiences</li> <li>Define role and objectives for digital strand of CSE team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build processes for continuous review of digital access to audiences</li> </ul>
Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define, articulate and embed social media strategy for EPSRC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop process for greater agility and innovation through social media engagement with audiences</li> </ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build evaluation capability across CSE team through GCS learning</li> <li>Support the development of agreed benchmarks across Research Council communications teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider option to develop evaluation hub across Research Councils to review and continuously improve across all communications activity</li> </ul>



