

Arts and Humanities Research Council

Communication Capability Review

Management Summary

1. Management Summary

About the review

1.1 AHRC is a funding and convening organisation, working in partnership with others to advance arts and humanities research.

1.2 Communications is central to the AHRC mission. Its Royal Charter provides AHRC with an explicit responsibility for public engagement. Communication also plays an essential role in fostering and engaging the community of researchers in the UK, as well as partners and stakeholders, including government.

Communications organisation

1.3 The AHRC communications capacity is small, with fewer than six full time equivalent staff working in the communications team, within an organisation of 69. It has the smallest communications team of the research councils, and has the smallest budget for communications (£471k in 2014/15 covering events, publications, press and PR, digital, and staff)

Findings

1.4 Communications and engagement are integral to much of the work of the council and are treated as such by AHRC leadership. Staff and stakeholders have a high regard for the AHRC communications team, who have delivered some highly impressive communications work.

1.5 The communication team has a deserved reputation for delivering high quality and varied communications products. They have a culture that encourages innovation, and operate as a flexible multi-skilled team. They appear to be equally effective delivering low-cost, in-house communications work as they are working in partnership with others to deliver high profile public engagement.

Recommendations

- 1.6 There are opportunities to build on these successes to deliver more effective communications. In particular by:
- ensuring that they are able to integrate systematic evaluation into the way they operate;
 - building on current digital capability;
 - address uncertainty about the role of the AHRC brand and public affairs;
 - developing methods to draw on wider resources to scale-up communications activity when required, including by sharing resources with other research councils.

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2. Background to the review

- 1.7 The Communication Capability Review of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is one of a series of reviews across Whitehall departments, Arm's Length Bodies and agencies. The review fieldwork took place in January 2015.
- 1.8 Each review is carried out by a combination of peer and external reviewers; this mini-review was conducted by Maxine Taylor from King's College London, and Stephen Hale from the Department of Health. 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.
- 1.9 Communication is a pan-organisational responsibility. The review's scope covered the breadth of AHRC's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division.
- 1.10 The review team interviewed around 15 people in a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviewees included AHRC's communications staff, the CEO and members of the leadership team key stakeholders such as representatives of universities, museums and the BBC.

Organisational context

- 1.11 AHRC was founded as a Research Council and received its Royal Charter in 2005, having been in existence as a Research Board, the AHRB, since 1998. As the national funding agency for arts and humanities research AHRC has more than 50 disciplines within its remit.
- 1.12 Each year AHRC spends approximately £98m to fund research and postgraduate training often in collaboration with a number of partners. As with all the UK research councils, AHRC has responsibility for generating public awareness and encouraging public engagement and dialogue, as defined in its Royal Charter.
- 1.13 It is sponsored by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, working alongside and sometimes in partnership with the six other UK Research Councils.
- 1.14 AHRC has 69 members of staff with a further 20 employed by AHRC but working for the Professional Services Unit which serves AHRC, ESRC and EPSRC.
- 1.15 In 2015 AHRC is marking the tenth anniversary of its formation to showcase and celebrate the achievements of the council and the arts and humanities community.

Implications of context for communications

- 1.16 In an environment of budget tightening AHRC faces the challenge of making the case for arts and humanities as a whole while also attending to an academic community spread

across over 50 disciplines, ranging from ancient history to modern dance, literature to digital content.

3. Communications organisation

Leadership and direction setting

3.1 The Communications Team sits within AHRC's Resources Directorate, with the Head of Communications reporting to the Director of Resources and through him to the Chief Executive. Three Research Councils - AHRC, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) - share 'middle-office' HR, Finance and Information Services functions through the Professional Support Unit (PSU).

3.2 The Royal Charter provides AHRC with an explicit responsibility for public engagement. AHRC's strategy 2013-2018 and Delivery Plan 2011-2015 also provide the strategic steer needed to ensure alignment between organisational and communications objectives and activities undertaken.

The role of communications for AHRC

3.3 The centrality of communications to the work of AHRC is made clear by the Royal Charter, which states that the council should "strengthen the impact of arts and humanities research by encouraging researchers to disseminate and transfer their knowledge to other areas where it can make a difference".

3.4 The role for communications is further outlined in its communications strategy (2011-15):

- promote the excellence of AHRC-funded research and its impact;
- engage the arts and humanities research community in the work of the AHRC and build strong links to new stakeholders;
- provide leadership in communications to embed excellence and best practice across the AHRC;
- to develop the 'feed-through' of arts and humanities research to national broadcasting;
- advance knowledge, awareness and understanding of the arts and humanities among the general public; and
- ensure effective and timely communications to senior managers on matters relating to AHRC's corporate reputation.

3.5 In addition to these strategic aims AHRC communications also states that it prioritises efficiency, innovation and evaluation.

AHRC communications team

3.6 The AHRC communications capacity is small, with fewer than 6 full time equivalent staff working in the communications team, within an organisation of 69. It has the smallest

communications team of the research councils, and has the smallest budget for communications (£471k in 2014/15).

3.7 The team works across a range of delivery channels. Its key areas of activity include press and PR, digital communications, social media, events, internal communications, publications, broadcasting and public engagement.

3.8 The AHRC Communications team works closely with a variety of partners, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the British Library, the British Museum, Wikimedia UK, the BBC, National Trust, English Heritage, Nesta, Arts Council England, the Scottish Funding Council, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, the Guardian's Education and Culture networks, Cheltenham Festival, the School of Advanced Study and many others.

4. Findings

Summary

- 4.1 Communications and engagement are integral to much of the work of the council and are treated as such. Staff and stakeholders have a high regard for the AHRC communications team, who have delivered some hugely impressive communications work.
- 4.2 The communication team have a deserved reputation for delivering high quality and varied communications products. They have a culture that encourages innovation, and operate as a flexible multi-skilled team. They are equally effective delivering low-cost, in-house communications work as they are working in partnership with others to deliver high profile public engagement.
- 4.3 There are opportunities to build on these successes to deliver more effective communications. In particular by ensuring that they are able to integrate systematic evaluation into the way they operate, build on current digital capability, address uncertainty about the role of the AHRC brand and public affairs, and develop methods to draw on wider resources to scale-up communications activity when required.

Positive areas

Strategy and planning

- 4.4 It is clear that communications work is really well integrated into the AHRC business, and the core AHRC programmes in particular.
- 4.5 The communications team is well placed to identify opportunities for communications to add value to the work of the council, with members of the team sometimes stepping in to lead new projects and areas of work themselves.
- 4.6 The reviewers were impressed with the culture within the communications team. Team members are empowered to innovate and pilot new ideas. The success of this approach can be seen in the range of successful communications approaches and products.
- 4.7 The reviewers heard positive feedback from stakeholders about AHRC communications. The communications team are well respected, in particular for their strength in delivering high quality communications products.

People and resources

- 4.8 The communications team is small but punches above its weight, delivering some exceptional communications products from within limited resources.

4.9 The reviewers heard very positive feedback about the head of communications. He is highly regarded within AHRC, he has strong internal sponsorship by his chief executive and directors, his voice is reflected around the boardroom table, and he has a presence on the programmes management group, which seems to be critical to his success in leading integrated communications work. He is also well respected amongst the AHRC stakeholders. He has been able to lead the communications function in new directions, empowered by the Chief Executive to innovate and broaden the scope of communications work.

4.10 The reviewers were impressed by the highly engaged and motivated team, in particular by the mutually supportive team culture.

4.11 Team members appear to be focussed on their own personal development, and are proactive in developing new skills. Team members seem to have good all-round communications skills and are able to lead and deliver work across a range of communications disciplines.

Implementation

4.12 The team have delivered some outstanding, and often pioneering, examples of communications work.

4.13 The reviewers were impressed with the partnership working with the BBC, and New Generation Thinkers, in particular. But the quality of AHRC communications products is clear in across a range of channels including multimedia, events, digital and print, and through media outreach.

4.14 Given the convening role of the council, a focus on delivering high quality events seems a wise strategy. The reviewers were impressed with the positive feedback we heard from stakeholders about the professional delivery of AHRC events, and the ways in which the communications team have been able to extend their impact and reach, including by integrating social reporting techniques and social media.

4.15 The team have delivered some really effective digital products, some with very high production values. The reviewers heard about examples of AHRC produced digital products generating viral interest in the work that AHRC funds. The reviewers also heard how well received the AHRC podcasts have been amongst the academic community.

Areas for improvement

Strategy and planning

4.16 The reviewers were struck by the differing views we heard about the AHRC as a brand. The reviewers heard from stakeholders about the role of AHRC as an enabler, and the generosity of the AHRC in enabling others to take credit when working in partnership. But

the reviewers also heard disappointment about missed opportunities to develop and strengthen the brand through the work AHRC funds.

4.17 The reviewers heard from stakeholders that there may be more opportunities to work across the research councils on shared agendas, and in order to scale-up communications work when necessary. The reviewers found some evidence of communicators working in collaboration across research councils, but there may be further opportunities to work together to make the most of combined expertise and reach, and to influence stakeholders, including government.

4.18 The reviewers noted a lack of a public affairs role for the communications team. The reviewers heard that arts and humanities will need a strong profile in the UK, particularly in Whitehall and the devolved administrations, if research is to continue to receive support and funding. Other research councils do have a strong public affairs resource, some within their communications teams.

4.19 The reviewers found much evidence of monitoring of communications work and the measurement of communications outputs. Less evidence, however, was noted of systematic evaluation of the strategic aims of communications work. As a result it was not always easy to identify what the outcomes of communications work were, beyond the successful delivery of products.

4.20 Similarly, the reviewers felt there may be opportunities to develop more sophisticated approaches to understand user journeys, and to segment and target different audiences groups.

People and resources

4.21 The communications team are small in number. They benefit from the agility they have as a small team, but they may need to find ways to call on wider resources.

4.22 The reviewers found some impressive examples of digital communications products. A desire was heard for AHRC to be an exemplar for digital communication, particularly given the importance of the digital projects that AHRC funds. There is clear enthusiasm for digital methods within the communications team, and a willingness to develop new skills. But if the AHRC is to develop a more sophisticated approach to digital engagement (e.g. to map influencers, build communities, and act on insight) it may be necessary to develop more expertise and leadership in-house.

Implementation

4.23 The reviewers were impressed by the delivery of communication products produced by AHRC, and noticed a real strength in delivering set-piece print and digital products. There may be untapped opportunities to exploit more sustained engagement and marketing

methods. Email in particular felt like an underexploited channel, particularly given evidence of a highly engaged community of subscribers.

4.24 An increased emphasis on evaluation may provide opportunities to deliver communications work with greater impact. The reviewers heard that evaluation is sometimes regarded as a big exercise that takes place at the end of a piece of work, if at all. If AHRC are able to integrate evaluation of strategic objectives into communications work, they may be better able to justify investment of future resources, as well as pivot to more effective approaches along the way.

5. Recommendations

4.25 This report has 4 main recommendations:

4.26 **R1 Communications strategy:** The reviewers recommend that a new communications strategy for AHRC focusses on how communications will help deliver core programmes of work, rather than focussing on developing channels. Importantly, it is recommended that a new strategy integrates the evaluation of strategic objectives into the delivery of communications work.

4.27 **R2 Brand review:** The reviewers recommend conducting a review of the role of the AHRC brand in communications work. In particular to review the value of developing the AHRC brand, and other research council brands, as a strategic lever, but also to help distinguish between the main modes (community building, public engagement, influencing) that AHRC communications operates.

4.28 **R3 Digital expertise:** AHRC should take steps to ensure that it is able to build on the success of its multimedia and digital publishing work, and continue to review the balance between digital and print production. In particular, the reviewers recommend that AHRC reviews whether it has the necessary levels of digital expertise and leadership within its communication function to develop and deliver a programme of ambitious digital engagement and community management.

4.29 **R4 Cross council working:** The reviewers recommend that AHRC works with RCUK and the other research councils to find ways to utilise shared communication and public affairs resources. Given the limited resources of the communications team within AHRC, there would seem to be much to gain by drawing on the resources and expertise of others, without diminishing current subject matter expertise.

Actions

4.30 To achieve the outcomes intended by the report’s recommendations, the reviewers have suggested some specific actions for implementation in **six and twelve months**

Item	Action in six months	Action in 12 months
Brand review	Review of the role of the AHRC brand in communications work	Decision about when to promote the AHRC brand, against specific audiences, and when it is not a priority.
Communications strategy	Develop new AHRC communications strategy focussed core programmes of work with systematic evaluation of outcomes	
Digital expertise	Review digital expertise and leadership within communications team	Develop digital engagement approach and strategy, to better exploit communications and engagement opportunities.
Evaluation	Define specific communications objectives and ways to measure. Create dashboard.	Quarterly reporting against key measures.