



**Science and Technology Facilities
Council (STFC)
Communication Capability Review
Summary Report**

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1. Management Summary

About the review

1.1 The Communication Capability Review of the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) 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 STFC is a multi-disciplinary scientific research organisation undertaking and supporting research across a broad range of physical and life sciences, at its world leading large scale facilities. STFC's vision is to maximise the benefits of its research to people's lives and to the prosperity and security of the UK.

Role for communications

1.3 STFC's communications function is primarily 'science communications' seeking to directly explain to the public and stakeholders its scientific outputs, their impact and benefits. STFC also delivers on its Royal Charter function to use the "excitement of its sciences" to inspire young people to undertake STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects in school, apprenticeships, further and higher education, and post-graduate work.

Positive findings

1.4 STFC has a good communications team which is respected by stakeholders internally and externally. It has a number of strengths as a communications function, in particular media relations, partnerships and internal communications. There is strong, visible leadership from the Head of Communications, with a motivated and credible team playing an influential role supporting business objectives.

Areas for improvement

1.5 The review found that there could be greater join up between STFC's communication and public engagement functions to maximise opportunities. The communication team also needs to embrace continuous improvement, with active evaluation, to build on its strengths and further raise its performance.

Recommendations

1.6 The review panel recommended:

- A single STFC integrated communications plan and process across communications and public engagement teams.
- A strategic social media plan.
- Developing an improved multi-media content offer, with better coordination within the team in generating content across channels.
- Strengthening STFC's stakeholder function by embedding a best practice model of stakeholder engagement.
- Revisiting skills and capability of the communications team with a skills audit following the re-focused strategic planning.
- Embedding an evaluation framework in line with GCS best practice.





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2 Background to the review

- 2.1 The Communication Capability Review of the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) 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, and Lester Posner, head of New State Pensions communications at the Department for Work and Pensions. 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 STFC's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division.
- 2.4 The review team interviewed 27 people in a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviewees included 12 communications staff, five senior staff/directors and key stakeholders such as the Royal Astronomical Society, BBC, UCL, CERN, and STEMNET.

STFC: Organisational context

- 2.5 STFC is a multi-disciplinary scientific research organisation undertaking and supporting research across a broad range of physical and life sciences. It is one of seven publicly funded Research Councils in the UK. As a non-departmental public body within the Business, Innovation, and Skills portfolio, STFC reports to the Minister for Universities and Science and to Parliament.
- 2.6 STFC's vision is to maximise the benefits of its research to people's lives and to the prosperity and security of the UK. It directly employs around 1,700 researchers, technicians, and support staff at its facilities at Swindon, Harwell, Daresbury, Chilbolton, Cleveland Potash Mine, and Edinburgh. A small number of staff is permanently based at CERN in Geneva.
- 2.7 STFC has three core business functions underpinning its organisational vision:
- providing access for more than 7,500 scientists each year to world leading, large-scale facilities in the UK and Europe;
 - supporting around 1,700 researchers undertaking research in particle physics, nuclear physics, and astronomy and space science at universities and its facilities; and
 - promoting academic and industrial collaboration through its Science and Innovation Campuses at Daresbury and Harwell, with the aim of translating science outcomes





into new industries, businesses and jobs. This is underpinned by its globally recognised capabilities and expertise in technology.

- 2.8 STFC also delivers on its Royal Charter function to use the “excitement of its sciences” to inspire young people to undertake STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects in school, apprenticeships, further and higher education, and post-graduate work.
- 2.9 STFC is a steward for a range of high profile international science collaborations; for example the Rosetta mission to Comet 67P in late 2014, and the Large Hadron Collider restart in 2015, and major new investments in international space research facilities.
- 2.10 The Triennial Review 2013-14 confirmed that STFC was operating effectively and efficiently. Stakeholder feedback, including formal biannual meetings with BIS, confirms that STFC has built a solid reputation for high quality service and policy delivery, and is extending its reach, influence and capabilities.
- 2.11 STFC faces ongoing tight finances in 2014-15, and in 2015-16 (from the outcome of the Spending Review 2013), and an uncertain funding future from 2016-17 onward under the expected but not -yet-announced CSR 2015.
- 2.12 In addition STFC, along with other science employers, has increasing difficulty in recruiting skilled staff for its laboratories and therefore to fulfil part of its Charter obligation to provide trained scientists and engineers for the economy. Efforts to increase successful recruitment to STFC, and support its wider STEM-supportive activities, are therefore of increasing importance.





3. Communications organisation

The role of communications for STFC

3.1 STFC's communications function is primarily 'science communications' seeking to directly explain to the public and stakeholders its scientific outputs, their impact and benefits. It supports the business objectives of the organisation by:

- demonstrating the impact of STFC research and how it delivers real benefits to UK and its citizens;
- raising awareness of how investment in science and technology reaps huge economic and societal rewards in the future;
- ensuring that the UK's lead role in internal science is recognised and acknowledged nationally and globally. For example, CERN is just as much a British lab as it is French or Swiss;
- helping to attract young people into STEM subjects, and thereby help to secure the nation's future, through communicating the excitement and inspiration of "big science";
- encouraging its stakeholders and partners to amplify messages about the benefits to the UK of investment in science and technology; and
- demonstrating the effectiveness of STFC as an organisation in delivering cost effective and innovative scientific outcomes, through its facilities, researchers, and grants.

Communications function

3.2 STFC's communications department sits within the central Strategy, Performance and Communications Directorate. It is charged by the CEO with developing the 'golden thread' which runs through the organisation.

3.3 A total of 43 FTE are employed by STFC, split between 26 in communications and 17 in public engagement.

3.4 STFC's total communications and public engagement spend for 2014-15 is approximately £3.0m including staff costs - £1.7m communications and £1.3m PE.

3.5 The communications department works closely with STFC's international relations, impact and performance management, strategy development, and horizon scanning teams. There is a deliberate focus on enhancing levels of cooperation and coordination with other Research Councils, BIS, other government departments and agencies.

3.6 The Communications department is physically located at four sites. 26 FTE work in communications, divided up into six functional teams working together in an integrated way:





- **Media/press office:** four staff with responsibility for STFC's media relations strategy. The team also acts as the 'press office' for the UK particle physics, astronomy and nuclear physics community, and with the UK Space Agency coordinate promotion of UK space science.
- **Strategic and international communications:** four staff with a particular focus on enhancing industry engagement with science, positioning the UK internationally, and extracting full value from UK investment in international science organisations
- **External Communications:** five staff covering social media, speeches, science writing, publications commissioning and management.
- **Web:** five staff responsible for CMS, development and publishing. STFC operates a bespoke CMS, and supports the 'corporate' site as well as 12 specialised scientific interaction sites for its science units.
- **Internal Communication:** three staff delivering a fully integrated suite of channels including face-to-face engagement, weekly e-zine, intranet, staff forums, display screens and cross-site learning visits.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** three staff specialising on monitoring and support for STFC's Strategic Stakeholder Framework including key industry partners and lead universities, as well as support for governmental and parliamentary relations (submissions, briefings, correspondence, visits) and engagement with constituency MPs on local issues.
- **Strategic Events** two staff specialising in planning and delivery of high profile stakeholder and PE events, including travelling science roadshows. STFC also delivers events on behalf of RCUK.

Public engagement

3.7 STFC also operates a separate public engagement (PE) function, which is split between a 'commissioning' team and 'delivery' units.

3.8 The PE team focuses on delivering STFC's Royal Charter obligation to use the excitement of its sciences –to inspire young people to undertake STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects in school, apprenticeships, further and higher education, and post-graduate work.

3.9 This is done directly through activities including student visits, teacher Continuous Professional Development training, and public events at STFC's laboratories and at other venues, through print and online resources, and through an extensive international network of partners including fellow Research Councils. STFC's current programme engages annually with more than 330,000 primary and secondary school students, 17,600 teachers, and one million members of the general public.

3.10 The PE commissioning programme operates through strong partnerships with external organisations including the UK Space Agency, Department for Education, Natural History Museum, Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society, and scientific collaborators such





as the Diamond Light Source, European Space Agency and with the other Research Councils.

4 Findings

- 4.1 STFC has a good communications team which is respected by stakeholders internally and externally. It has a number of strengths as a communications function, in particular media relations, partnerships and internal communications.
- 4.2 There is strong visible leadership from the head of communications, and the team is playing an influential role supporting business objectives.
- 4.3 The review also found a transformation in the team's relationship with key stakeholders, especially STFC's science research community.
- 4.4 However, the communication team needs to embrace continuous improvement, with active evaluation, to build on its strengths and further raise its performance.

Positive areas

Strategy and planning

- 4.5 Communications objectives are closely aligned with the objectives of the business. An overarching strategic communications plan is in place for 2015 to 2020, and used to prioritise activities. STFC uses a stakeholder framework to identify and manage key relationships.
- 4.6 Communications are generally well integrated at STFC with joined up messages externally and internally, and consideration of audiences and channels. The review saw a number of examples of good integrated communications plans, for example on upcoming announcements at CERN.
- 4.7 Senior leadership recognise the role of communications and realise they have a role to play, for example taking part in the quarterly staff forums. The Chief Executive is supportive of the communications team and plays an active role in driving the strategy and staff engagement.

People and resources

- 4.8 Communications is well-resourced with a motivated, credible, and knowledgeable team, led by a visible, articulate, and strong head of communications. A team of 26 full time communicators provides a comprehensive offer across all channels working in an integrated way with the public engagement and marketing functions.
- 4.9 The capability of the communications team has been strengthened over the last 18 months with an emphasis on greater professional skills, for example on social media.





4.10 Communication staff are seen as experts on their subject matter by the media, and their skills are valued within organisation. This expertise is helping to put UK 'big science' on the map. There is evidence of commitment to continuous developments and a skills audit has taken place.

4.11 Senior staff within the council actively support the internal and external work of the team. The scientific community supports the communications effort and is media-trained by communications. There has been a significant improvement in the relationship between the communications team and its research community; through a greater collaborative approach, and recognition of the value of the communications team, for example in providing expert advice on engagement events and activities.

Implementation

4.12 STFC's press office has established very good relationships with the main science correspondents, and has achieved some notable successes in getting the 'UK angle' on the big science stories into the mainstream media; in particular the switch on at the LHC, and discovery of the Higgs Boson.

4.13 The press office has a strong reputation for being pro-active with correspondents, for example inviting reporters to visit STFC's sites and offering regular briefings. They "always have an answer and nothing is too much trouble for them", according to one reporter.

4.14 Press officers are good at recognising stories of national interest, and providing access to STFC's facilities and scientists. Other evidence of best practice included media surveys and the operation of a 24/7 service for out of hours calls. An embedded team at CERN is also playing an important role in identifying opportunities for pro-active stories which enhance the reputation of UK science on an international stage.

4.15 Internal communications has been transformed at STFC and is meeting the challenge of engaging more than 1,800 science and technical staff across diverse locations, using a variety of channels and tools. This includes a staff intranet, weekly e-newsletter, quarterly staff forums, and annual leadership conference.

4.16 Internal communications has clear role delivering critical health and safety communications, engagement, and corporate messaging, as well as encouraging staff to act as "internal advocates" for STFC's mission. Quarterly forums led by the Chief Executive and his senior team are popular and valued by staff, and there is evidence to show they are driving a culture of openness within STFC.

4.17 The communications team has a good reputation with its primary stakeholders, and has established some strong strategic partnerships, which they use to deliver integrated communications, for example to promote the UK angle at CERN, research outcomes, business start-ups, and engagement activity on STEM subjects.





- 4.18 STFC's partnership work was praised by a number of stakeholders in the review and the team was seen as delivering "high professional, quality outcomes." STFC liaises with 20 universities, CERN, media, science centres and others to bring particle physics to the centre stage, and plays an instrumental role in coordinating international science communications, for example with the new formed European ESS project, based in Sweden.
- 4.19 The communications team is plugged into a network of scientists at STFC, and there is strong evidence to show the research community see the value in supporting STFC's strategic communication objectives.
- 4.20 STFC is very effective at managing events and open days and its roadshow programme has delivered impressive outputs as part of an expanded engagement portfolio over the last 18 months. Roadshows are strategically planned to align with key themes of the communications plan, for example the international year of light, and the team are innovating in their use of social media to measure impact and engage people in the events. The team also manages events on behalf of the other RCs.

Evaluation

- 4.21 There is evidence of some evaluation taking place on STFC communication activities across internal communications, media, and stakeholder engagement. Insight from evaluation is being used to improve future activity in some cases, for example on internal communications engagement, and to increase the effectiveness of STFC's roadshow programme.

Areas for improvement

Strategy and planning

- 4.22 While there is some evidence of integration between communications and public engagement activities, the review found there could be greater join up to maximise opportunities to deliver its main objectives to promote science communications, for example through using multi-media content and digital channels. The Public Engagement team are aware they need to do more to reach audiences who cannot access face to face events, through digital means. There is a real opportunity to be seized here.
- 4.23 Greater visibility is needed of STFC's communications plan, and the specific roles of the communications team. The review found that some stakeholders were not aware of the communications plan and its objectives, and this might be hindering a more integrated approach.
- 4.24 STFC has a stakeholder framework and a strategic approach to identifying its priority audiences, but the depth of analysis and planning on stakeholder engagement could be





further improved, to ensure the organisation is clear on the strategic purpose of all activity and the opportunities for developing new partnerships and advocates.

4.25 The use of digital channels at STFC is mainly tactical and at an early stage. There are significant opportunities for STFC to use digital and social media to enhance its communications and public engagement functions, and develop a two-way conversation with its audiences.

People and resources

4.26 Given its high communications and public engagement team headcount – the largest of all the research councils- the review recommends a skills and roles audit in line with the updated plan. STFC should also look at opportunities for gaining improved efficiencies, for example sharing services. The review team acknowledges this is already a subject of ongoing activity by STFC's communications management.

4.27 New skills and resources may, for example, be needed to improve STFC's offer on content generation. The review found evidence of differing standards of quality of content across channels; a more consistent approach is needed with greater emphasis on quality control. The head of communications may wish to consider the role its embedded science writer could potentially play here in driving up the standards of content, for example.

Implementation

4.28 While there is some evidence of integrating social media into the communications mix, for example on cross government campaigns, promoting research outcomes, and aiding recruitment of scientists, the review found STFC's digital offer to be limited, and of a varying quality.

4.29 Many of the respondents in the review identified the Chief Executive's twitter channel when asked about the organisation's use of social media. STFC needs to consider how to use digital channels effectively for public engagement, communicating with hard to reach audiences and developing two way conversations.

4.30 STFC needs to improve its multi-media offer, and how it shares and promotes its own content. The review found that science media would be very receptive to a richer content offer with more human interest stories, high quality video, and latest platforms such as Vine, so as to fully promote its exciting science.

4.31 The press office arguably relies too much on the big science stories, such as the LHC at CERN, and this could possibly be at the expense of promoting other STFC messages and facilities. More emphasis could be given to broader PR activity to extend to reach of its communications, for example with business and consumer titles.





Impact

4.32 While evaluation is taking place, this emphasis is more on outputs than outcomes. However, the review recognises the challenges of measuring the impact of science communications, especially on public engagement. STFC should embed an evaluation framework in line with best practice across all of its channels. Evaluation should also be shared with key partners where appropriate to demonstrate the impact of STFC communications strategy and secure buy-in. Rigorous evaluation will help the unit embrace a culture of continuous improvement.





5 Recommendations

- 5.1 This report has 6 main recommendations:
- 5.2 **R1:** A single STFC integrated communications plan and process across communications and public engagement teams so as to identify the opportunities for joining up across channels to deliver STFC’s strategic communication objectives, and which is visible to key stakeholders.
- 5.3 **R2:** A strategic social media plan which gives proper consideration to developing two-way engagement with STFC’s audiences.
- 5.4 **R3:** Developing an improved multimedia content offer, with better co-ordination within the team in generating content across channels such as website and media offerings and with consistent quality standards.
- 5.5 **R4:** Strengthening STFC’s stakeholder function by embedding a best practice model of stakeholder engagement, which provides visibility and ownership of key relationships across the organisation and opportunities to develop new partnerships.
- 5.6 **R5:** Revisiting the skills, resources and capability of the communications team with a roles audit following the re-focused strategic planning.
- 5.7 **R6:** Embedding an evaluation framework in line with GCS best practice, which is regularly reviewed to ensure continuous improvement of the communications team and outputs and contribution of the wider council.

Actions

- 5.8 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"> • Single integrated plan for communications and public engagement. • Potentially contribute to wider RCUK consideration of role for and coordination of public engagement. • Strategic social media plan with consideration of audiences and channels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles audit to assess capability against refocused and modernised plan • Develop capability, either independently or as part of RCUK collective, to deliver activities identified to build two-way engagement.
Content Offer	Develop improved content offer, particularly digitally and manage quality standards across story	Integrate communications team to ensure coordination of high quality content across





	areas and channels e.g. media, website.	all channels
Stakeholder management	Enhance the stakeholder function by embedding a best practice model.	Develop opportunities for new collaborations and partnerships to further support STFC communication objectives.
Evaluation	Embed evaluation to build on the communication team's strengths and further raise its performance.	Regular benchmarking and evaluation of communication performance across the council so as to embed an expectation of agility and continuous improvement.

