



**Natural Environment Research
Council (NERC)
Communication Capability Review
Management Summary**

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1. Management summary

About the review

- 1.1. The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) 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. NERC acts within a wide arena of environmental issues that spans outer space, land, the sub-surface, both poles and deep sea. It supports a large community of scientists, PhD students, universities, research institutes and facilities.

Role for communications

- 1.3. NERC's leaders view communications as important both in engaging the science community and also reaching wider audiences. In the short term, key communication priorities are to set out the role and purpose of NERC as a commissioning body and to make the case for sustained funding. The RCs are also obliged by royal charter to engage the wider public with research, although the specific requirements are relatively vague.

Positive findings

- 1.4. The review panel was impressed by the capability of the recently appointed senior communications lead, who is clearly well thought of, and of some of the middle and more junior members of the communications team, notably in the writing, digital and social media skills areas. The panel supported the management's programme of change for communications that will introduce much needed strategic direction and re-structuring.

Areas for improvement

- 1.5. Communications is falling short on engagement with external and stakeholder audiences, where a more strategic and pro-active approach is required. Internal communication seems almost non-existent, while evaluation is an acknowledged area for improvement. Media relations responsiveness and digital communications also need improvement.
- 1.6. There is a risk of a loss of momentum following the impetus of the recruitment of a senior communications lead, if her proposed changes are not acted upon soon.

Recommendations

- 1.7. The review panel recommend that:
 - The pace of change be increased, supported by a clear message from leadership to the whole organisation that both internal and external communications is a top priority.





- Communications needs to be involved in high level discussions, beyond the Director of Corporate Affairs and including the Head of Communications, to ensure visibility of the communications function.
- Working with the media needs to be more proactive and timely.
- Digital communications skills be further developed, alongside channel evaluation.

1.8. These recommendations are proposed in isolation. The overarching pan RC recommendations should also be considered for their implications for NERC.





2. Background to the review

- 2.1. The Communication Capability Review of the Natural Environment Research Council, NERC, 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 Arthur Leathley, Director, Cross-Government Communications, Cabinet Office, supported by Karen Franck, a member of Government Communication Service (GCS). 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 NERC's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division.
- 2.4. The review team interviewed around 18 people in a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviewees included NERC's communications staff, senior NERC staff and directors and key internal and external stakeholders.

NERC: organisational context

- 2.5. The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) is the UK's leading public funder of environmental science. It invests £330m each year in grants for cutting-edge research, postgraduate training, innovation and technology in UK universities and research centres. The Council's vision is to place environmental science at the heart of responsible management of the planet.
- 2.6. Corporately, NERC employs 250 people, while collectively, it employs nearly 3,500 people. It supports 3000 scientists and 1000 PhD students, 1000 research projects and 60 UK or international programmes, 55 universities and 20 research institutes, and has a UK research capability that comprises four ships, seven aircraft, six polar bases, six data centres, and thirty-two community facilities.
- 2.7. The issues that NERC deals with invite a significant level of public scrutiny, for example, shale gas and climate change, and the Icelandic volcano aviation disruption. This level of scrutiny highlights the challenge of maintaining corporate reputation and a neutral non-campaigning positioning.





- 2.8. NERC supports six research centres. The ownership and governance of four of the six NERC centres is undergoing change: the British Geological Survey (BGS); the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH); the National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS); and the National Oceanography Centre (NOC). Ownership and governance of two of the six NERC centres, the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and the National Centre for Earth Observation (NCEO) will remain unchanged.
- 2.9. NERC appears to be more closely linked to BIS and Whitehall than several of the other Councils, although the review heard that this relationship is sometimes crisis-based rather than strategic.
- 2.10. The Chief Executive of NERC is Professor Duncan Wingham, who took up his four year appointment at the beginning of 2012. The reviewer understands that the leadership has underlined the importance of NERC becoming more externally focused, more proactive, and promoting outcomes and benefits of research much more clearly. Communications is expected to play a core role in these cultural shifts, and has been listed by the Council leadership as a priority for the organisation. A major objective is to strengthen support for NERC's 'licence to operate' by providing consistent and coherent information to external stakeholders.





3. Communications organisation

Leadership

- 3.1. Reflecting the prioritisation of communication by NERC's leadership, a new Director of Corporate Affairs was appointed in July 2014 to lead NERC communications through a time of change and deliver significant improvements around strategy, capability and efficiency.
- 3.2. The Director of Corporate Affairs reports directly to the Chief Executive of NERC, and there is a direct line of report from Head of Communications to the Director of Corporate Affairs. The Head of Communications has a dotted line of report into BIS communications, where the degree of contact appears limited.

Role of communications in NERC

- 3.3. The role of communications is:
 - To demonstrate the value of what NERC does to all stakeholders: the public; Government; parliamentarians; research users; research providers; strategic partners (e.g. Met Office, Innovate UK); and corporate NERC and staff
 - To use public engagement and dialogue to build ongoing support for, and acceptance of, funding of environmental science
 - To support clarity of identity and purpose for NERC, raising its profile and supporting the Council's 'licence to operate'
 - To support change management internally and promote employee engagement.

Communications team

- 3.4. Part of the communications lead's role is to restructure the communications team. Currently, there are just under 10 FTE in the team, including the secondment of a part-time designer. The proposed restructure will reduce the team to 7.0 FTE, and is anticipated to come into effect in May 2015.
- 3.5. These figures exclude the Head of External Affairs and Engagement (a role currently advertised) and the four reports the Head will have under the new structure. The Head, in turn, will report directly to the Director of Corporate Affairs. Also reporting to the Director of Corporate Affairs and excluded from these figures is the Associate Director for Strategy, Impact and Evidence whose reports are under review and may increase to accommodate the change of emphasis for this team.
- 3.6. The reviewer understands that the public engagement function will move from the core communications team to external affairs and engagement in the new structure. This will be important in developing public engagement. A separate strategy for public engagement is





being developed and it is crucial that this meets the stated intention of aligning closely with the draft communications strategy.

- 3.7. In this period of change and instability, the appointment of a communications lead at executive level heralds a new and positive direction for the team. The reviewer heard that, historically, communications has been *“shunted around the organisation a bit”* but was now undergoing *“a visible evolution.”*





4. Findings

Summary

- 4.1. The prioritisation and current focus on communications within NERC have provided the impetus for the introduction of a more strategic approach that is likely to deliver significant improvements to NERC communications. There is a consensus internally – but also, to some extent, externally - that communications is moving in the right direction and will in time be core to the working of the council.
- 4.2. Evidence of a more strategic and professionalised approach to communications includes, for example, a communications strategy and a planned stakeholder audit. However, the pace of change needs to be accelerated and plans implemented that take communications to the next stage of its evolution; there is a now a risk of creating a gap between high expectation and delivery.
- 4.3. While the executive level communications lead is well-regarded, there is the risk of single-point failure; the communications team as an entity needs to have greater authority and further professionalization; the calibre of the Head of Communications will be vital to team's future status within the Council and in future should, similarly to the Director of Corporate Affairs, have sound communications credentials.
- 4.4. While many planned improvements are in place, particular attention should be focused upon relationships with external stakeholders who often find NERC insufficiently proactive; relationships with BIS and Whitehall, which need to be more strategic and proactive; and with its centres, where again, relationships need to be better and more strategically managed.
- 4.5. There is a real opportunity in 2015, when NERC marks its 50th anniversary, to press home the council's value and to highlight the benefits of environmental science.

Positive areas

Strategy and planning

- 4.6. Indicative of a new level of responsibility and value that is now being placed on communications by NERC's current leadership, an executive level communications lead was appointed in July 2014. Within six months of the arrival of the Director of Corporate Affairs, communications has an increasing voice within the organisation, and a fresh link to the top table. The communications lead is gaining an in-depth understanding of the





Council's business, which is informing communications strategy and planning, and the future direction of the communications team.

- 4.7. A draft communications strategy is now in place, following several years when no strategy existed. Consequently, communications objectives are starting to deliver the Council's business plans, and communications is beginning to align with business leadership through strategy, when previously this has not been the case.
- 4.8. As part of this more strategic approach, a new stakeholder audit is being undertaken, which should deliver much needed up-to-date insight into, and prioritisation of, NERC's diverse audiences. As one external interviewee commented: *"Full marks to them for recognising...the wider stakeholder. It's about reaching out to more people than the usual suspects – the research and academic communities – but to the business community, and the general public."*

People and resources

- 4.9. The appointment of the Director of Corporate Affairs is considered to be an excellent recruitment, both internally and externally. Building on the leadership's intention to prioritise communications within NERC, the creation of the new post has strengthened the reporting lines into the executive team and has facilitated stronger engagement with the council leadership.
- 4.10. Members of the communications team appear to have been energised by this appointment and the promise of a new direction that will raise the status of communications within and beyond NERC. The proposed restructure of the communications team should help develop this new focus, ensure resources are aligned with business priorities, and enable individuals within the team to develop their skills and realise their potential.
- 4.11. On the evidence of the members of the communications team participating in this review, the team appears to have a reasonably good combination of communications skills and specialist scientific knowledge. Internal recognition of the team's current and potential strengths was evident: *"They've got a number of vibrant and fully qualified individuals in the team, with more senior bods metamorphosing into comms bods"*.
- 4.12. More specifically:
- The writing skills within the team, and the ability to turn dry information into good stories effectively tailored to the non-scientific community, were reported to be excellent. An internal client commented that *"There's some exceptional science writing capability. Science writing is quite challenging, quite a skill, and I frequently see examples of [them doing] a grand job."*





- Planet Earth, a magazine and online product highlighting high profile research for non-specialist audiences, was singled out by some stakeholders for the quality of its content.
- Digital and social media skills were in evidence among the more junior members of the team, and this digital knowledge was apparently being shared through informal training sessions among NERC colleagues across the organisation.
- The support of the communications and engagement team in helping to deliver training courses to, for example, graduates, was reported as efficient and timely.

4.13. There is an encouragingly strong appetite within the team for learning new skills and becoming more professional. In the absence of a formal training and development programme, individuals have used their own initiative to engage in training courses and acquire further professional accreditations.

Implementation

4.14. There are some signs of digital communications being used, albeit tactically. For example, one interviewee positively cited a series of podcasts designed to promote the work of the Council. There is an enthusiasm from both junior and senior communications practitioners within NERC to develop the use of digital and social media, and some informal efforts are being made to educate the wider NERC community in the use of platforms such as blogs and Twitter.

4.15. Several stakeholders indicated the value of the ‘huddle’ meetings that take place infrequently but regularly between NERC and its partners, which were seen as a useful forum for the sharing of information and relationship-building. However, it was considered disappointing that these meetings had not been initiated, and consequently orchestrated, by NERC. The reviewer sensed an appetite for increasing or formalising these meetings.¹

Areas for improvement

Strategy and planning

4.16. While it was acknowledged that the senior communications lead has only been in post for six months, and that a communications strategy is in draft and due to be signed off in early March, the reviewer raised concerns about the pace of change following the positive impact of the appointment. There is a clear need to accelerate the pace of change and implement the new communications strategy, not only to put plans into action, but also to sustain and harness the motivation of the communications team. Visible and continued support from NERC’s leadership is also required: the Chief Executive has made clear that

¹ Since the review, the review panel has learned that NERC has taken action to co-ordinate the next huddle meeting, which is scheduled for July 2015.





communications is a priority for the Council and this needs to be repeatedly stated overtly and clearly to ensure it is widely recognised. As one senior member of NERC observed: *“The resounding message I want to get across is that we have a part of the organisation that is core to that organisation and that is coming up with ideas and really helping us; and I look forward to that growing relationship.”* This message has not yet reached the entire organisation.

- 4.17. While the communications lead seems to have a voice at the top of the Council, the reviewer felt that others must be prepared to listen to and accept her recommendations, particularly where they concern partnership working that might involve a more radical approach and increased proactivity. There is also a continuing need for NERC communications to be consistently immersed in high-level discussions.

People and resources

- 4.18. After a clear signal from leadership of the intention to improve communications, and while galvanised by the appointment of the Director of Corporate Affairs, there is a risk within the communications team of waning enthusiasm and motivation if, as already indicated, the pace of change is not now accelerated.
- 4.19. The communications team needs direction from its leadership to take it through to the next stage of its evolution, setting out clear priorities, inspiring the team with confidence, and helping it to realise its full potential. Regardless of any apprehension that might exist within the team, the implementation of the communications strategy should go ahead without delay. One interviewee observed that the communications leadership *“...Is a competent and capable individual. She’s had time to bed in and we should see the fruits of her labour quite soon.”*
- 4.20. While communications leadership is strong at executive director level, the leadership role at Head of Communications level will be critical to the continuing development of the team. It is suggested that a relatively senior communications professional would be most appropriate for the role. Some internal interviewees pointed to the risk of ‘single-point failure’, should a strong lead not be in post once the Director of Corporate Affairs has implemented the required changes and has less direct oversight of the team.
- 4.21. Digital and social media skills lie with junior members of the communications team, and need to be encouraged and developed, while aligning with strategic objectives. The proposed team organogram, with its continued emphasis on digital expertise, indicates that this is in hand. Media skills need to be recognised and developed within the team, and would benefit from senior oversight.





- 4.22. While several members of the communications team are committed to continuous personal development, this seems to be happening on an ad hoc basis, often the result of individual initiative. There is no formalised Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme, and training and development at NERC communications is no more than an idea or intention, and this should be addressed quickly.
- 4.23. While the new team structure introduces a post dedicated to internal communications, this is at a relatively junior level. A highly competent and professionalised individual will be needed to develop – or closely oversee the development of - NERC’s internal communications from its current zero base.

Implementation

- 4.24. There is a shortfall in communications with NERC’s external audiences, such as the media and wider public. The Council deals with significant environmental issues that are of widespread interest, yet communications are not sufficiently pro-active or timely, and journalists are not being pointed in the right direction: One external interviewee said: *“As an entity, it ought to be a fountain-head of great stories, but it’s difficult for us to get a handle on where the most interesting stories are. They’re not giving the science they’re funding the profile it deserves, with its slightly amateurish PR.”* NERC was compared unfavourably by one interviewee to NASA and Cambridge University, considered to be exemplars of good practice in media relations.
- 4.25. Communications also falls short on stakeholder engagement, of which there are numerous examples: there is no clear approach to targeting parliamentarians; contact with BIS occurs more at the crisis than strategic level; the Council is reported to demonstrate a lack of understanding of smaller businesses, who remain unaware of the outcomes of the Council’s scientific work; and there is some comment, internally and externally, that a stated commitment to public engagement does not always translate into action. The Chief Executive has made clear that stakeholder engagement needs to be a priority. This work needs to be pursued consistently, with the Chief Executive himself, and other senior members of the Council having direct engagement with stakeholder at every opportunity.
- 4.26. NERC communications must develop better links with its centres via more open dialogue and a more structured approach to relationships, for example, by introducing regular meetings. It should take more initiative in the bolstering of these relationships, rather than letting others take the lead, as it can add significant value to joint working.
- 4.27. Once NERC has a better understanding of its audiences, and the communications strategy is in place, the use of digital communications needs to be increased, and innovation in this





area encouraged. There is an acknowledgement that NERC is behind the curve in this area, despite occasional initiatives. The use of printed publications versus online product would also benefit from review, on the back of a real understanding of audiences and channels.

4.28. There is no internal communications strategy, and a surprising lack of reference to the value of staff engagement and this is holding back the speed of communications delivery.² The approach to internal communications seems ad hoc with no identifiable oversight or ownership for staff – who variously attribute responsibility for IC to the Head of Communications, HR or the Strategy Unit. This is despite an intention that this now sits and is owned within the communications team and so more needs to be done to ensure clarity of responsibility across NERC in this area. A strategy for informing and engaging staff needs to be developed that is cross-Council as well as NERC-specific, and that is clearly aligned with external communications. There is an appetite for significantly increasing the currently limited collaboration between HR and communications and opportunities to improve this work should be taken up.

4.29. Evaluation is an acknowledged area for improvement for NERC communications, and needs to be aligned with GCS principles:

- There is an increasingly strong requirement to measure the impact of NERC activities in order to demonstrate its value to all stakeholders and help continue to secure funding.
- Evaluation is generally thin, with no evidence of outputs informing future activity. There is a need to prioritise and benchmark core activities, once communications and stakeholder strategies are in place and objectives are clarified. Key metrics can be identified and then measured over time.
- While it is suggested there is evaluation capability within the communications team, this capability is underused.
- It is understood that a staff survey is conducted annually, modelled on the pan-government People Survey, but there was no evidence that the data collected was acted upon or shared. This can lead to frustration among those who have pressed for improvements through the survey. In a period of change and instability, no-one was able to give an evidence-based view of staff morale. A clear opportunity exists for a NERC (and pan-RCUK) annual staff survey that can monitor and inform staff engagement, as well as more qualitative forums for gauging staff morale as the Council undergoes change.³

² Since the review, the review panel has learned that an internal communications strategy is now being developed in alignment with the overarching communications and stakeholder strategy.

³ Since the review, the review panel has learned that NERC has launched a 'You Said, We Did' approach for communicating the results of the 2014 staff survey.





5. Recommendations

This report has the following recommendations:

- 5.1. **R1: With a new communications strategy under discussion, the pace of change needs to be increased, and the strategy implemented.** The communications team needs to understand what its direction and priorities are, and the wider organisation needs sight of the strategy.
- 5.2. **R2: Further clear leadership is required by the Chief Executive to show that communications – both internal and external - is an important priority for NERC and to lead, alongside communications, the stakeholder engagement programme.** The CE and communications lead need to take joint responsibility in firstly ensuring, and then demonstrating, that this message is embedded within the organisation.
- 5.3. **R3: It is important that all senior communications staff are involved in high level discussions, and that this goes beyond the Director of Corporate Affairs.** Preparation for the future must take into account that the communications team as an entity needs to have credibility and leverage within and beyond NERC, and not rely on a single director.
- 5.4. **R4: NERC needs to work with the media in a more proactive and timely way, above all to underline NERC's leadership in research across all key areas.** Systematic horizon-scanning and planning should be introduced to identify stories of potential interest to, specifically, non-scientific audiences.
- 5.5. **R5: NERC communications needs to further exploit and develop its digital communications skills, and assist others in the council to make use of these channels.** Evaluation should be developed as this will be important in ensuring the most effective use of channels.
- 5.6. **R6: NERC needs to ensure that internal communications is given due priority and oversight both in the new communications team structure and communications strategy.** Links with HR need to be established and nurtured.





Actions

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

Item	Action in six months	Action in 12 months
Communications strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented • Team working with clear objectives and priorities • Clear support for strategy from CE and council leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangible benefits of strategy in evidence
Stakeholder audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completed and actioned • Priority stakeholders clearly identified and targeted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangible evidence of improved stakeholder relationships • Tangible evidence of benefits derived
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic and proactive approach to relationships with media – to include horizon-scanning, planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of good stories being used by media, to inform and educate wider public • Evidence of improvement as trusted source
Training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal development plan in place for all members of the communications team, following GCS principles • Existing skills channelled and utilised to full potential, aligned with business objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of up-skilling and accreditation • Evidence of improved performance, initiatives
Digital / social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing capability harnessed and developed • Usage increased – alignment with business/communications objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusted and authoritative point of contact for digital and social media • Demonstrable efficiencies
Internal communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership of IC communicated, and understood throughout Council • Strategy drafted • Stronger collaboration with HR – e.g. staff engagement, change management, corporate messaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of data from staff survey shared and, following staff feedback, actioned; lessons learned • Internal / external communications alignment
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership of, and responsibility for evaluation, established • Evaluation plan in place – priorities identified, benchmarking programme marked out, key metrics agreed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learnings from benchmarking being applied • Evaluation programme in place – continuous, ad hoc • Evidence-based decisions being made.

