

1. Introduction

The MRC process for planning and assessing public engagement and communication activities has recently changed.

At the start of a new quinquennium, units and institutes enter a five-year cycle, in line with the QQR cycle. Public engagement and communication is no longer included as a separate section in the main QQR report to the subcommittee and is assessed separately to the main QQR report. The new planning and assessment process involves partners (where appropriate) and independent external assessors and aims to use existing documentation wherever possible. For university units the process is aligned and integrated with the university unit oversight processes.

2. Five-year planning cycle

See Summary – Appendix A

2.1 Year one

Following the completion of a QQR, the MRC Corporate Communications team will assist the unit/institute director to develop a five-year Public Engagement and Communication Strategy which supports the science that has been funded.

The Public Engagement and Communication Strategy should include:

- Overall communication objectives
- Target audiences
- Key messages
- Resources
- Monitoring and evaluation processes

This Public Engagement and Communication Strategy planning takes place once in the Quinquennial cycle, unless circumstances alter significantly and either the unit/institute director or the MRC Head Office requests an ad hoc review.

For university units, a partner university representative is invited to participate in the strategy development discussions.

2.2 Annually (Years one to five)

An annual implementation plan, outlining activities and resources which support the five-year strategy, is produced by the unit/institute for the forthcoming year. The annual implementation plan should include:

- Specific communication objectives
- Activities
- Resources allocated
- Evaluation mechanisms

At the end of the year, the implementation plan is evaluated against the objectives for that year, resulting in an evaluation report, and the implementation plan set for the following year. This ties in with the annual MRC monitoring controls already in place. For units, this is the Director's Annual Statement of Internal Control (DASIC) and for university units, this is the University Unit Assurance Statement (UUAS).

For university units, the Annual Director's Meeting, at which public engagement and communication is a standing agenda item, should be used to identify and discuss emerging issues, threats and opportunities.

2.3 Mid-term review (Year three)

Around the mid-term point of the Public Engagement and Communication Strategy, the MRC Corporate Communications team holds an informal review meeting with appropriate representative/s from the unit/institute. For university units, a representative from the partner university is invited to participate.

The review is primarily to discuss progress against the Strategy objectives, identify any issues, threats and opportunities and, where necessary, to discuss and agree a revised or remedial implementation plan (or Strategy if required).

For university units, the mid-term review is intended to help with preparation for the Year Three Oversight meeting at which public engagement and communication is an agenda item.

2.4 Assessment (Year five)

The timetable for the Public Engagement and Communication Assessment is identical to the timetable for the scientific QQR. Public engagement and communication is assessed separately to, but at the same time as, the main QQR report. The Unit's Public Engagement and Communication Report should be separate to the main QQR Report and submitted to the MRC QQR Reviews team at the same time as the main QQR Report.

There is no need to include a full section on public engagement and communication in the main QQR report. However, a brief strategic summary of public engagement and communication activity must be included in the Director's Overview in the main QQR report (see section 6).

3. Public Engagement and Communication Report

The Public Engagement and Communication Report and supporting documentation should demonstrate how the public engagement and communication assessment criteria outlined in section 8 have been met.

The Public Engagement and Communication Report should contain a short introductory paragraph on the unit, with information on unit size/staff number, basic structure and number of science programmes.

It is also helpful to the assessors if the report is structured to address the four sections of the assessment criteria in order:

- A: Introduction, overview of communication aims and priorities
- B: Evidence for the range of activities carried out
- C: Status, recognition and reward
- D: Activity monitoring and evaluation for impact

The assessment uses existing, supporting documentation wherever possible, including:

- Five-year communication strategy (see section on Transition period below)
- Annual implementation plans
- Annual evaluation reports
- Mid-term review findings
- Researchfish 'Engagement' data
- DASIC or UUAS returns
- Communication training records
- Evidence of budget or resource allocation

The MRC Partnership Communications Manager will discuss with the unit how best to gather and present existing documentation, alongside the Public Engagement and Communication Report.

4. Using Researchfish data

MRC units/institutes are expected to enter all public engagement and communication activities relating to their research. Any activity that does not fall under a specific programme research/funding area, for example non-scientific staff visiting a school or running an activity where no scientific staff are involved, should be entered against the programme of the investment director. There is no problem with duplicate entries if several programme leaders have been involved with the same activity.

As Researchfish data is only formally confirmed and submitted once each year (usually in October or November) units/institutes should advise MRC Head Office if they would prefer that the Engagement data to be used for the Public Engagement and Communication Assessment is live and includes all data entered (but not confirmed) up until the report is generated.

5. Transition period

Until all units have completed their current quinquennium, annual communication plans will be used in the assessment process, in place of the five-year communication strategy and annual implementation plans.

However, units/institutes in this transition period (particularly those in years two to four of the current quinquennium) are encouraged to develop a communication strategy (eg three-year strategy) and annual implementation plans to take them to the end of the current quinquennium.

6. Public engagement and communication in the main QQR report

The Public Engagement and Communication Report is complemented by a strategic summary of public engagement and communication activity provided as a mandatory part of the Director's Overview in the QQR report. Public engagement and communication should not be reported within individual programmes unless exceptionally important or onerous to that programme. Directors are asked to highlight where particular scientists have carried a very heavy burden of public engagement and communication work which may have impacted on other research outputs during the quinquennium.

There is no set length for the section on public engagement and communication in the Director's Overview, but it should:

- Explain briefly why you chose the Unit's current Public Engagement and Communication Strategy
- Highlight any notable successes and/or failures in the Unit's public engagement and communication activities over the previous quinquennium.
- Identify any Programme Leaders or other Unit staff who have contributed over and above what is normally expected in public engagement and communication activities

7. Public Engagement and Communication Assessment

The Public Engagement and Communication Assessment is conducted by a representative from the MRC Corporate Communications team and an external public engagement and communication specialist. For more information on the criteria for external assessors see section 9.

A written assessment of public engagement and communication is compiled by the assessors and sent to the QQR Subcommittee. The assessment includes a score (out of ten). For the scoring criteria see section 8.

The subcommittee receives the Public Engagement and Communication Assessment for information, context and comment; only in very exceptional circumstances would the subcommittee request a re-score of an assessment.

8. Public Engagement and Communication Assessment Criteria

There are a total of 14 Public Engagement and Communication Assessment criteria contained within four sections. Six key criteria of particular importance (shown in italics) carry a maximum award of two points each. All remaining criteria, carry a maximum award of one point each. Points are awarded on how well the criterion has been demonstrated to have been met. Half marks are allowed.

Full score = criterion fully met

Partial score = criterion partially met

Zero score = criterion not met

A maximum of 20 points is available. The assessors' scores are averaged and then divided by two to give a final score out of ten. If the assessors' individual scores out of 20 differ by five or more points, a second external assessor will be asked to score the

Public Engagement and Communication Report Criteria

A: Introduction, overview of communications aims and priorities

1. There is a clear plan and rationale to the programme of activities identified. They are complementary to the current MRC corporate communications strategy and were reviewed in conjunction with the partnership communications manager. (2)
2. Objectives, stakeholders and activities are well defined in discrete objectives. (1)
3. Appropriate resources (staff, budget and training) were allocated. (2)

B: Evidence for the range of activities carried out

4. The unit participated in an appropriate range of relevant initiatives, carried out on a scale proportionate to the size and resources of the unit. (2)
5. The unit has demonstrated a new, innovative or distinctive approach to its activities, or shown 'best practice'. (1)
6. The unit acts as a champion or focal point for communications or public engagement or has had its work adopted by other units or partners or recognised externally. (1)
7. The unit devised initiatives to tackle a particular challenge, such as a complex or controversial area of science or overcame specific barriers to engagement or progress. (1)

C: Status, recognition and reward

8. Communications and stakeholder engagement are integral to the mission of the unit, with clear evidence of leadership, training and capacity-building. (2)
9. Staff from across the unit and at different levels are supported and encouraged to take part in activities. (1)
10. Staff are recognised and rewarded for their involvement in public engagement and communications activities. (1)

D: Activity monitoring and evaluation for impact

11. The unit has systems in place for monitoring activities and sharing information with local communications teams or head office colleagues. (2)
12. The activities set out in the unit communications plan have been implemented. (1)
13. Evidence is presented for specific outcomes and/or impacts arising from the unit's activities with target audiences. (2)
14. The unit was successful in meeting the objectives described in the unit communications plan. (1)

9. Person specification for external public engagement and communication assessor

External assessors must be able to assess a unit's success across a range of communications and public engagement disciplines, including media work, and should be familiar with the principles of evaluation so as to judge whether a unit has met their public engagement goals. Consequently, an assessor should have practical, personal experience in delivery of communications activities.

The external assessor should be working in a communications role within a scientific research organisation in the UK and external to the MRC. This could be in a research charity, a university, a hospital or a research institute primarily funded by other UK research councils or a charity. It is not essential that the assessor is engaged in the fields of medical or health research as long as they are working within science.

The assessor must have a minimum of four years' professional experience in a communications role. Experience in strategic communications planning and in two out of corporate communications, public engagement, media and public affairs is essential.

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MRC Quinquennial Review Process
for public engagement and communications
Summary - Five-year planning and assessment cycle

Stage in cycle	Action
Beginning of Year 1	Develop 5-year communications strategy and Y1 implementation plan with MRC (and partner) communications teams.
End of Year 1	Review Y1 implementation plan, produce evaluation report and agree Y2 implementation plan.
End of Year 2	Review Y2 implementation plan, produce evaluation report and agree Y3 implementation plan.
Beginning of Year 3	<p>Arrange mid-term review meeting with MRC (and partner) communications teams.</p> <p>Review progress against 5-year communications strategy and update strategy as required.</p>
End of Year 3	Review Y3 implementation plan, produce evaluation report and agree Y4 implementation plan.
End of Year 4	Review Y4 implementation plan, produce evaluation report and agree Y5 implementation plan.
Mid-end of Year 5 (in line with QQR report submission deadline)	<p>Review Y5 implementation plan and produce evaluation report.</p> <p>Ensure Researchfish 'Engagement' data is up to date before 5-year report is generated by head office.</p> <p>Prepare documentation for public engagement and communications assessment, in conjunction with MRC Communications rep, including public engagement and communications report if required.</p> <p>Include brief summary of public engagement and communications activity in director's overview in main QQR report.</p> <p>Submit final public engagement and communications report/documentation to QQ Reviews team at same time as main QQR report.</p>
Throughout five years	Ensure 'Engagement' section of Researchfish is being used to record Unit's public engagement and communications activities and impact.