Introduction

Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019, the MRC’s refreshed strategic plan, sets out the MRC’s strategic direction, building on our strengths and achievements and taking account of new scientific opportunities to secure tangible impact from MRC research.

The strategic plan sets out how we will:

- Support excellent discovery science.
- Strengthen partnerships, to promote the translation of research findings.
- Accelerate the pace of improvements in health and stimulate economic growth.

Bringing the benefits of excellent research to all sections of society is one of four aims in the plan, and includes the following objective:

To enhance engagement and communication with our scientists and partners, policymakers and parliamentarians, and the public.

This objective confirms our duty to engage with the public and other groups to give an account of our research and to ensure that public views and concerns are reflected in our decision-making. Our need to have open discussion and debate with our stakeholders and the public is the driving force behind this Communication and Engagement Strategy.

The Strategy was approved by MRC Council at its meeting in October 2014.

Communication and Engagement

Communication and engagement are essential components of successful organisations.

The MRC relies on effective communication and engagement, and as these are levers of impact this strategy aims to show how communication can support Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019.

Our Communication and Engagement Strategy will support excellent discovery science by:

- Ensuring that the MRC is perceived as a trusted authority on medical research.
- Making the case for continued funding for medical research by showcasing the positive impact of research on health, society and the economy.
- Helping MRC researchers tell their story, informing their research in the process.
- Improving understanding of research amongst parliamentarians to help maintain a well-regulated and supportive research environment.
- Raising awareness of the rewards derived from a career in research, to ensure a reliable pipeline of research leaders for the UK research base and industry.
Our Communication and Engagement Strategy will help accelerate the pace of improvements in health and economic growth by:

- Sharing the outcomes of research to enable a wide range of audiences to access and use research results.
- Sharing our strategic direction and funding decisions across the research community, initiating new partnerships and collaborations.

A Shared Vision for Research

The MRC supports the shared vision of the UK research councils that the UK will be the number one place in the world to do research, innovate and grow business.

To deliver this vision, the research councils need to realise the full potential of the UK’s research and innovation ecosystem, and to develop the right skills, leadership and infrastructure for tomorrow’s challenges. We also need UK Government commitment to an ambitious, long term strategy to drive international competitiveness.

The MRC will work with the UK research councils to promote messages which support this vision, including:

- The MRC sets research priorities which are most likely to deliver improved health outcomes.
- The MRC is working with its partners to bring the benefits of excellent research to all sections of society.
- The MRC is working to ensure there is a robust and flourishing environment for world-class medical research in the UK.
- The MRC is working to improve the progress of international health research worldwide.

Purpose and Scope of this Strategy

This Communication and Engagement Strategy is for the MRC community in its entirety.

It shows how each part of the MRC community – researchers, technical and support staff, admin staff and communication and engagement colleagues – plays a critical role in engaging colleagues, stakeholders, partners and others, thus ensuring that the ambitions, activities and achievements of the MRC are communicated clearly and effectively.
Building on the previous Communication Strategy, our refreshed approach will:

- Support the strategic needs of the MRC by focusing on areas where we can make the greatest impact, for example by supporting our investments in informatics and our partnerships with industry and charities.
- Deploy our resources cost-effectively.
- Leverage support through partnerships and collaborative working.
- Enhance and extend our engagement with the public by providing advice and resources for researchers to communicate with the public, and rewarding and recognising them for doing so.

**Stakeholders and Audiences**

We rely on many organisations and partners to deliver our strategy.

The organisations and partners we work with have specific requirements, and our communication and engagement activities aim to ensure that the information needs and preferred approach of each group is met.

We think of our stakeholders according to the share they have in the MRC and our success.

**Advocacy:** those who share our aims, ideals or goals, and who are most likely to speak or act in our support; for example MRC staff and students; Council and Board members; trial and study participants; the biomedical research community; visitors to MRC events and online followers.

**Reputational:** those who stake their reputation (at least in part) on our performance; for example BIS, UK Government and devolved administrations.

**Delivery:** those on whom we depend to deliver on our strategy; for example MRC-funded researchers and support staff, funding and industry partners, trial and study participants.

**Influencers:** those who influence others to act in our favour; for example members of the public, Higher Education Institutions and the research community; research charities and patient groups, the media.

These groupings are not fixed, nor are they mutually exclusive. They serve simply to guide our communication and engagement activities and the information we provide.
Our Engagement Strategy

We seek to take our stakeholders and audiences on a journey from awareness to advocacy.

We cannot win trust, build loyalty or secure advocacy for our research from individuals and groups who are unaware of who we are or what we do. Our Communication and Engagement Strategy aims to create connections with individuals and groups and encourage them to take the next step in this journey.

The grid below provides a visual interpretation of the journeys different groups may take, and indicates where on this journey they might start and end.
Our Channels

We strive to make our research ambitions and achievements readily accessible to our stakeholders and other audiences.

Rather than relying principally on MRC communication channels and the mass media to communicate with our audiences, we plan to open up our channels to our partners, and we will seek to publish our content on our partners’ communication channels. In doing so, we hope to enrich our communications and extend our reach.

The grid below shows how a broad approach to digital and media communication can deliver benefits to the MRC and our partners. The same approach can be applied to face-to-face engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Publish content on MRC channels</th>
<th>Publish content on social media</th>
<th>Publish shared/partner content on MRC channels</th>
<th>Publish MRC content on partner channels</th>
<th>Narrowcast to target media and specialist press</th>
<th>Broadcast to UK mass media channels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>Inform and engage MRC community</td>
<td>Extend reach beyond MRC channels</td>
<td>Enrich content for MRC community</td>
<td>Extend reach beyond MRC channels</td>
<td>Raise awareness of MRC activity</td>
<td>Raise awareness of MRC activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retain interest of MRC community</td>
<td>Build interest in MRC and recruit followers</td>
<td>Build relationship with partner organisations</td>
<td>Build interest in MRC and engage audiences</td>
<td>Encourage interested audiences to seek information on medical research</td>
<td>Prime audiences to take an interest in medical research</td>
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Implementation

Communication methods and practices are continually evolving. We need to be able to work in this ever-changing environment in ways that are flexible and responsive to the dynamic nature of research and society, at the same time increasing awareness and understanding of the MRC and the impact of our research.

In implementing this strategy, we will adopt a focussed, project-based approach. This acknowledges the interdependence and inter-relationships between different communications activities and different MRC functions, for example, that policy work is more effective if it is supported by concurrent press and public relations activity.
Public Engagement

Public engagement is an integral part of MRC research.

As such, public engagement is delivered by MRC-funded researchers: we know from Researchfish that between 2006 (when data collection began) and 2013, MRC funded researchers undertook 23,292 individual engagement activities with a wide range of audiences outside academia.

By engaging with members of the public, researchers provide insight into science, modify stereotypes, show the human story behind the scientific endeavour and build public trust in science.

In Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019, the MRC commits to:

- Helping the public to understand our scientific findings and assess the impact these may have on their own lives, on the economy and on society as a whole through direct access to our scientists at events, and by providing understandable information online and in the media.
- Enhancing and extending our engagement with the public by providing resources for researchers to communicate with the public, and rewarding and recognising them for doing so.

To meet these commitments, the MRC will:

- Implement agreed changes to the quinquennial review process which enable easier recognition of public engagement work, and improve public engagement monitoring and reporting.
- Work in partnership with universities, charities, industry, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, devolved administrations in the UK, Research Councils UK and others to improve our understanding of our partners’ needs and perspectives, and work with them using relevant and effective channels and mechanisms.
- Encourage and support our scientists to embrace public engagement, deliver agreed public engagement projects and report on their activities.
- Recognise the important contribution that public engagement makes to the MRC mission by having a public engagement theme as part of our annual CEO Awards.

The communication section will:

- Actively manage our relationships with partner universities and maximise access for our researchers to public engagement and communication resources and training.
- Capitalise on the MRC Centenary legacy by:
  - Managing and supporting an annual MRC Open Week (for a minimum of three years) to engage the MRC community, share MRC scientific research with local audiences and increase awareness and understanding of the MRC.
  - Continuing the Medical Research Live citizen science programme, introducing one new activity each year, with ideas being canvassed from MRC directors and programme leaders.
- Increase the effectiveness of public engagement across the community by providing training, sharing best-practice and pooling resources and knowledge, including sharing materials where appropriate.
- Improve our ability to evaluate public engagement activities through more joint working with research councils and other organisations, following government best practice, and by making the best use of the engagement section of Researchfish.
- Build a case for additional funding for MRC-funded scientists to engage with the public.
We ask MRC-funded scientists to:

- Embrace public engagement and undertake public engagement activities and projects.
- Ensure that their engagement activities are aligned with the aims of their own research establishment and with the MRC Communication and Engagement Strategy.
- Report on their public engagement projects and activities by recording them as fully as possible in Researchfish.

**Engagement within the MRC Community**

We would like members of the MRC community to feel proud of and committed to the MRC.

Our communication work is directed at a range of audiences, not restricted to MRC employees, but also taking in the wider MRC-funded research community. While the communication section manages the main channels for communicating with the MRC community, successful internal communication and engagement requires contributions from across the organisation, especially from senior leaders and line managers.

In *Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019*, the MRC commits to:

- Nurturing and supporting the people who will become tomorrow’s leaders in discovery science.
- Enhancing and extending our engagement with the public by providing resources for researchers to communicate with the public, and rewarding and recognising them for doing so.
- Improving our effectiveness and our value for money, sharing best practice and maximising the use of resources.
- Leveraging support through partnerships and collaborative working.

To meet these commitments, the MRC will:

- Work to ensure that there is a culture of dialogue across the MRC, with all segments of the community understanding the role that they can play in contributing towards that, supported by the necessary communication channels.
- Foster and monitor a sense of engagement with and belonging to the MRC community by ensuring all MRC locations are included in MRC communication channels, and encourage greater interaction across MRC locations.
- Increase understanding, awareness and support of the MRC’s strategic aims, direction and ethos.
- Highlight corporate and individual achievements in order to engender pride in the MRC.
- Encourage engagement and dialogue between head office sites and other MRC locations.
- Work collaboratively with our partner universities and MRC researchers and other colleagues to ensure they feel engaged with MRC strategy and policy, and part of the MRC community.
The communication section will:

- Manage and promote a suite of channels for use by the MRC community:
  - *MRC Life* newsletter.
  - *MRC Network* magazine.
  - *MRC Insight* (blog).
  - *MRC Hub* corporate intranet (MRC employees only).
  - Corporate website.

- Manage and deliver a range of events to promote engagement with the MRC community:
  - MRC Millennium Medal award.
  - MRC Max Perutz Science Writing competition and award.
  - Biannual directors’ meetings.
  - Senior leadership visits to MRC intramural locations.

- Assign a named Partnership Communications Manager to each MRC location to undertake a schedule of regular visits that will engage and support the MRC community and:
  - Act as the communications and branding contact for each MRC location, and lead on the development of (and monitor compliance with) communication and brand policies, for example during unit transfers.
  - Where applicable, work with partner university communication teams to ensure MRC researchers can share resources and receive effective communication and branding support.
  - Support MRC institutes, units and centres in their public engagement and communication planning, and where necessary involve partner universities in this and in reviewing progress.
  - Lead on the assessment of public engagement and communication as part of the quinquennial review process for units and institutes.
  - Provide public engagement training and advice to MRC researchers and colleagues.
  - Manage the MRC seed-funding scheme to support public engagement by MRC researchers.

- Liaise with colleagues in the Research Programmes Group and Strategy Group to foster effective cross-directorate working and information-sharing.

- Look for ways to broaden the readership of *MRC Life* and consider expansion of the Senior Leadership Visits programme to include extramural establishments.

- With colleagues in Business Information Centre, develop the corporate intranet allowing more effective sharing of information and easier collaboration across the community.

- Support and advise colleagues in their MRC community engagement work:
  - CEO Awards (with HR).
  - Local Heroes awards (with HR).
  - MRC Fellows’ Symposium (with RPG).
We ask our community to:

- Recognise colleagues as their most valuable asset and include internal communication in their broader communication planning and delivery.
- Acknowledge the MRC support and funding they receive and communicate about MRC-funded research.
- Ensure relevant colleagues are aware of the requirements to acknowledge MRC support and funding, and of the need to communicate about MRC-funded research.
- Provide feedback on MRC support and engagement on matters relating to communication and branding.

Parliamentary and Policymaker Engagement

The MRC relies on the support and advocacy of organisations, individuals and groups with an interest in our affairs, and seeks to ensure that public policy decisions and health interventions are based on the highest quality research.

The MRC shapes and influences national and international policy through a range of activities, from the submission of evidence to government inquiries and consultations to the development and revision of clinical guidelines, participation in national consultations and the training of practitioners.

Our public affairs work builds relationships and promotes engagement with organisations and individuals – including ministers and parliamentarians in Westminster, Brussels and devolved administrations, civil servants, trade associations, think tanks, business groups, charities, other medical research funders and the public – and this stimulates support for medical research and improves understanding of scientific issues amongst parliamentarians.

In *Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019*, the MRC commits to:

- Supporting the need for evidence-based policy and decision-making through the timely provision of accurate, up-to-date information on policy-relevant topics.
- Providing expert advice and information about our research, and sharing the results and impacts of our work.

To meet these commitments, the MRC will:

- Work with colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to demonstrate the relevance and value of our work to all Government departments.
- Deliver value for money and share best practice and resources by working collaboratively with our many partners, particularly Research Councils UK, the Association of Medical Research Charities and other medical research funders.
- Foster cross-departmental working and collaboration in order to ensure coordinated engagement and messaging with stakeholders, parliamentarians and the public.
- Work with industry, biotech and other companies to showcase our partnerships with them and ensure that we are aware of their needs.
- Encourage and support our community to consider what impact their research might have on policy and practice, and to disseminate their research results accordingly.
We ask our community to:

- Work with MRC Corporate Affairs to keep us abreast of public affairs activity with relevant stakeholders.
- Embrace parliamentary engagement and undertake activities and projects.
- Consider how their research might impact on policy and practice, and seek opportunities to influence these.
- Ensure that their parliamentary engagement activities are aligned with the aims of their own research establishment and with the MRC Communication and Engagement Strategy.
- Report on their parliamentary and policy engagement activities by recording them as fully as possible in Researchfish.

The communication section will:

- Manage, coordinate and deliver a programme of activity which aims to increase support for medical research through sustained dialogue between parliamentarians, policymakers, medical research funders, industry partners and the MRC community.
- Pursue opportunities for the MRC community to engage with parliamentarians in Westminster and the devolved administrations, for example through events and visits that will enable parliamentarians to meet MRC researchers and find out more about their research and its impact.
- Provide advice and support for members of the MRC community seeking to engage and/or communicate with parliamentarians, civil servants and policymakers.
- Monitor forthcoming parliamentary events, debates, legislation, committee inquiries and other Westminster and devolved activities of relevance.
- Keep colleagues across the organisation up to date with relevant parliamentary and policy developments of interest to the MRC community and broader stakeholder groups.
- Provide support for those liaising with Ministerial offices and staff in relation to high profile developments and new announcements.
- Gather and share information and intelligence amongst relevant colleagues across the medical research community.
- Explore opportunities for shared messaging and collaborations across public affairs with partners and stakeholders, for example with the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.
Patient and Public Involvement

The MRC recognises the important contribution that patient and public involvement makes in delivering our mission.

We encourage our scientists to undertake patient and public involvement activities. We define patient and public involvement as dialogue between the MRC and patients and public, to gauge their perspectives and opinions on issues which will help shape MRC strategy and inform MRC decision-making.

We see patient and public involvement as distinct from public engagement, the way we inform the public about the work we do, the science we fund and how this might impact them. We recognise that these definitions are not mutually exclusive; they simply aim to help explain how the MRC characterises its different areas of activity.

In *Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019*, the MRC commits to:

- Seeking public input when reviewing major public health and translational research investments, and ensuring that the public is actively engaged in key areas, for example on the use of patient data through the Farr Institute for Health Informatics Research.

To meet these commitments, the MRC will:

- Understand and reflect patient and public views on important topics, for example the use of personal data in research, using a range of mechanisms for public dialogue and consultation.
- Work in partnership with charities to garner patients’ perspectives on our work, and use these to make our research more meaningful.
- Listen to patients and the public, understand their perspectives and stimulate dialogue and discussion with and amongst them so that, where appropriate, our research is informed and influenced by the views of patients and the public.
- Support and encourage scientists to undertake opportunities for patient and public involvement in their research.

The communication section will:

- Recruit and engage a pool of public volunteers who can be invited to take part in MRC patient and public involvement activity.
- Build on our relationship with INVOLVE and explore opportunities for maximising the use of common resources.
- Provide information and advice on a range of patient and public involvement techniques, to improve the likelihood of patient and public involvement.
- Champion patient and public involvement and identify possible opportunities for patient and public involvement in MRC establishments or with partner organisations.
- Work with the research community to develop a section on patient and public involvement in Researchfish, to capture activity across the research community.
- Using the information logged in Researchfish, develop case studies which showcase good practice in patient and public involvement and share these across the MRC.
We ask our research community to:

- Work with MRC Corporate Affairs to help deliver our strategy for patient and public involvement, for example by designing opportunities within their research projects to involve patients and the public, where appropriate.
- Share best practice, skills and expertise in patient and public involvement across the MRC community, and amongst the wider research community when possible.
- Share resources and guidance on the various tools that can be used to deliver patient and public involvement.
- Report on their patient and public involvement activities by recording them as fully as possible in Researchfish.

**Media Engagement**

Effective media engagement protects and enhances the reputation of the MRC as a trusted authority on matters relating to medical research.

It also enables us to share MRC messages, research and achievements with stakeholders and members of the public through a variety of media channels. The MRC press office is instrumental in generating media coverage of the MRC’s research and achievements and responds – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – to emerging issues which threaten our reputation.

In *Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019*, the MRC commits to:

- Helping the public to understand our scientific findings and assess the impact these may have on their own lives, on the economy and on society as a whole through direct access to our scientists at events, and by providing understandable information online and in the media.

To meet this commitment, the MRC will:

- Assign more resource to media engagement and strategic communications to enable us to pursue longer-term campaigns, support strategic priorities and build relationships with a wider range of scientists and journalists.

The communication section will:

- Support the strategic needs of the MRC by prioritising areas where we can make the greatest impact, for example by supporting our strategies in informatics and partnerships with industry and charities.
- Work to develop and implement mechanisms in MRC establishments that enable the early identification of strategically important research publications.
- Use the cross-directorate MRC Engagement and Communication Group as a means of assessing the status of strategically important areas of research.
- Provide early warning and advice to MRC staff and researchers of likely media interest in MRC-related events and issues, and on wider issues which may impact on the MRC.
• Build and train a team of MRC spokespeople who can speak clearly and authoritatively on key areas of MRC strategy, policy and research, who convey the independence of MRC scientists and who help build public trust in science issues.
• Provide expert advice and coaching to researchers prior to their engagement with the media, and arrange media training for them as required.
• Work with the Science Media Centre to ensure we are well placed to take advantage of emerging opportunities and have their support when dealing with difficult or sensitive issues.

We ask our research community to:
• Work with MRC Corporate Affairs to help deliver our strategy for media engagement, for example by sending newsworthy research papers to the press office or volunteering to be a media spokesperson.
• Report on their media engagement activities by recording them as fully as possible in Researchfish.

Editorial and Publishing
Communication channels have proliferated in recent years, allowing people to access the information they want or need via a variety of routes and at times that suit them.

Our aim is to reinforce MRC messages, positioning and reputation, and foster dialogue and engagement, by developing, creating and delivering content of excellent editorial, technical and visual quality.

In Research Changes Lives 2014 – 2019, the MRC commits to:
• Exploring current and emerging channels to communicate with groups through the channels they prefer in a cost-effective manner, for example the website, social media or printed leaflets.
• Understanding and reflecting patient and public views on important topics using a range of mechanisms for public dialogue and consultation.
• Working with industry, biotech and other companies to showcase our partnerships with them and ensure that we are aware of their needs.
• Delivering value for money and sharing best practice and resources by working collaboratively with our many partners, particularly Research Councils UK, the Association of Medical Research Charities and other medical research funders.

To meet these commitments, the MRC will:
• Play a major role in fostering public debate in areas of strategic or policy importance through sustained campaigns.
• Continue and expand effective working with other organisations, for example by encouraging others to promote shared messages.
• Enhance our role in promoting public debate of issues in health research.
The communication section will:

- Develop a strategy for the content we produce, taking account of who it is aimed at and the most appropriate channels for communication.
- Support and advise MRC colleagues to create and deliver communications in a digital age.
- Clarify the relationship between digital and print publications in order to maximise the use of our content by repurposing it for different channels.
- Continue to publish funding information that is timely and well-structured, and work proactively with colleagues across the organisation to ensure web pages are accurate and up to date.
- Bring ourselves in line with the government’s digital by default strategy by publishing content online first, whether that be on the blog, in the achievements section or as a news article on the website.
- Develop a comprehensive content calendar, making use of the new intranet if possible, to facilitate the coordination of content on our channels.
- Recognising that print continues to have a role in reaching certain audiences, conduct an MRC Network readership survey and an audit of all print publications to inform a print strategy.
- Investigate the use of RCUK facilities to streamline the production of our publications.

We ask our research community to:

- Share their content across the community, and consider publishing on channels other than their own.
- Engage with social media in whatever way they find manageable, to amplify research content on these influential channels.
- Follow the MRC’s social media guidelines, to ensure good practice and minimise the risk of reputational damage.
- Report on their publishing and/or social media activities by recording them as fully as possible in Researchfish.

**Evaluation**

Evaluation brings many benefits and must be adopted as a routine part of MRC communication and engagement activity.

Planned well, evaluation can:

- Help ensure projects have clear aims and objectives from the outset.
- Establish the extent to which objectives have been met and with what impact (where this is practical).
- Help people improve their practice in communication and engagement.
- Lead to shared learning across the MRC community and other research councils.
- Inform the planning of future activities and improve them.
- Encourage more people to take part in communication and engagement activities.

For each major project or activity, we advocate the adoption of an evaluation process which:

- Links evaluation to objectives.
- Uses an appropriate method of evaluation.
- Establishes what performance measures will be used, and how these will be collected.

The communication and engagement section can provide advice and guidance on evaluation.