**BOARD PAPER**

**DEVELOPING AN OVERARCHING STRATEGY FOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS**

**Background/Context**

The Health Research Authority (HRA) was established as a Non- Departmental Public Body (NDPB) on 1 January 2015. With a substantial body of work to deliver and as a relatively new organisation, the HRA has been focused on doing the engagement to support this delivery.

This active approach to engagement is embedded in the organisation utilising a number of dedicated routes as well as the expertise, networks and relationships owned and established by a number of staff. The effectiveness of this activity is visible in the results of the stakeholder survey work undertaken by Accent on behalf of the HRA see the ‘Public and Professional Assessment of the HRA’report paper.

The recent DH Internal audit of stakeholder management and engagement found the arrangements for stakeholder management and engagement could be significantly improved. This included the need for an organisation-wide approach, a link between the plan, stakeholder analysis and the management of stakeholder relationships and clear allocation of responsibilities.

This is a welcome piece of work that confirms my early view that a review is now needed and that the focus of the communications team needs to be placed on supporting the stakeholder engagement with a greater focus on tools and channels to reach them.

This, coupled with the HRA Approval Gateway Review and the new functions the organisation as a NDPB, also makes it the appropriate time to work with the new Board to develop a clearer strategy, structure and process to enable the organisation to better manage and engage with its stakeholders effectively.

This activity also requires a review of the existing communications strategy (originally published in February 2014) and approach as the two areas are intrinsically linked. A management review of the communications function is also underway and links closely to this work.

**Scope**

The overarching strategy will look to build on and maximise the impact of the existing expertise and dedicated routes for particular engagement, involvement and communication. It will provide a framework that both supports the delivery and cascading of high-level messaging and the opportunity for stakeholder input and feedback where new policy, guidance or ways of working are being determined by the HRA thus supporting buy-in to the HRA agenda.

Engagement and involvement activity will continue to be informed and delivered by subject matter experts within the HRA through project groups, steering groups and collaborative forums (both those owned and convened by the HRA and by other groups and networks). This is in recognition that the HRA is one important part of a much larger enterprise in the UK to deliver good quality health research for the benefit of patients, the public and all working within the broader area for health research.

The communications strategy will be re-focussed on supporting the priorities of the organisation and developing and delivering the tools and channels to support the HRA in working with its key stakeholders. The communications team will support the effective cascade but will be led by subject matter experts who will provide key content and messages as they are better placed to recognise the sensitivities associated with the role of the HRA and the landscape within which it operates.

**Priorities and Positioning**

The HRA has an established mission ‘to protect and promote the interests of patients and the public in health research’. With explanation it articulates well the mission of the HRA.

The HRA has also got a set of strategic aims in support of this mission which resonate more obviously to the ambitions and activities for the HRA .

‘Our overall strategic goal is to make the UK a global leader for health research.

We will work with a wide range of partners to help create an environment where more money invested in research goes into carrying out relevant, good quality research that is registered and published. To achieve this we will deliver the following strategic aims:

* Leading improvements that make it easier to conduct good quality research in the UK
* Improving efficiency and effectiveness of systems, and of advice and guidance
* Building and consolidating productive relationships with public and professional stakeholders
* Having a skilled, dedicated and motivated workforce and HRA volunteer ethics committee members
* Ensuring the HRA is managed and governed effectively, and provides value for money to the tax payer.’

The HRA Board will need to consider as part of the review of the stakeholder engagement and communications strategy whether it is timely to consider replacing the mission statement. It is proposed that any decision on that is taken at the same time as the decision on NHS branding so that if a change in branding is made the new mission is launched at the same time. Initial consideration of this is to be made at the Board seminar in May 2015.

As an organisation with regulatory functions alongside broader roles to facilitate ethical research in the UK the HRA needs to be realistic about the channels that are most effective at reaching our key stakeholders. To this extent it is unlikely that the HRA will be proactively courting significant wide media interest about its regulatory function or more detailed work within the broader research agenda. The HRA recognises that it is more likely to get the required public engagement and involvement through its expert activities.

Any proactive media activity is likely to be targeted at specialist trade media, which is generally read by our target stakeholders including researchers and research funders. With this in mind, particular care will be taken when considering the appropriateness of activity beyond the specialist trade press. All media activity will be channelled through the communications team but content for release and responses will be developed in close conjunction with subject matter experts.

The communications team will focus on developing the tools and channels to reach staff, volunteers and stakeholders, the majority of which will be delivered digitally including the website, intranet, social media, newsletters (such as HRA latest and HRA news) and publications. The review of stakeholder priorities and interest areas will help to identify if there are any gaps in communications channels or tools required by the organisation to support the cascade of messaging or dialogue.

**Stakeholder mapping**

Ahead of the seminar in May for the Board we will be looking to involve the Board on the development of the papers for the seminar in particular in concluding the mapping and prioritisation of stakeholders. The seminar will then enable the Board to consider where further attention or effort is required with consideration of the resources and map.

The seminar will also provide the opportunity for the Board to reflect on the operation of the re-focussed communications activity and to consider alongside the communications management review currently being undertaken. This will also enable us to match our efforts and resources to the priorities of our activities and needs of our stakeholders. This will support the whole organisation in the successful delivering of our work.

The intention is to involve the Board in providing feedback on the iterations of the strategy for stakeholder engagement and communications to enable the Board and other key staff to input and shape the work before the final document comes to the Board in the summer 2015.

**Conclusion**

The Board are asked to comment on the ‘direction of travel’ set out in this paper and advise if they are supportive of this approach.

The Board are asked to if they are willing to provide input into the development of this activity in the lead up to and including a seminar in May to support the work in this area.