

**Department of Health:
Communications Capability Review**



1. Management summary

Background

- 1.1. The Communication Capability Review of The Department of Health (DH) is one of a series of reviews across Whitehall. The review fieldwork took place in October 2013.
- 1.2. Each review is carried out by a combination of peer and external reviewers. The review methodology is based on interviews and examination of supplied materials. The reviewers evaluate capability against business requirements using a framework. This report contains their qualitative assessment of capability and provides recommendations for improvement.
- 1.3. Communication is a pan-organisational responsibility. The review's scope covered the breadth of DH's external and internal communication, including but not limited to that undertaken by its communications division. The review did not assess the communication capability of DH's individual arm's length bodies, though it did look at how they work with DH.
- 1.4. The review team conducted over 30 interviews. Interviewees included the Secretary of State, the Permanent Secretary, policy leaders and health correspondents.

Department of Health context

- 1.5. Both the National Health Service (NHS) and public health generally remain areas of intense media interest. Both areas are subject to significant national and regional scrutiny, reporting, discussion and commentary.
- 1.6. Public health administration, the NHS and also DH have undergone dramatic change over the last three years. The health and care system has experienced significant reform. DH is no longer responsible for the day-to-day running of the NHS but retains overall accountability. The reforms created several new organisations – including NHS England and Public Health England – and enhanced the responsibilities of others. In addition, although the health budget has been protected in real terms, demand is rising and cost-pressures are more intense than ever. Alongside these reforms are changes in DH's role and in the machinery of health administration. These include the creation of NHS England, an Executive non-departmental public body for commissioning primary care, and the establishment of Public Health England (PHE), an Executive Agency. In effect DH is now more focused on strategy and stewardship, and is taking a step-back from the day-to-day running of the NHS. A similar transition has happened with public health responsibility, which has transferred to local authorities (LAs).
- 1.7. Reference should also be made to the public and professional debate which was catalysed by patient deaths due to poor care between 2005 and 2009 at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust ('Mid Staffs'). Robert Francis QC chaired a public



inquiry on these events. His report from February 2013 has spearheaded a wider discussion over the importance of compassion in care, and the ability of the NHS and social care professionals to be candid about concerns over, or failings in, patient care. The associated media and public reaction to the report has had a dramatic impact on the organisational culture of the NHS.

- 1.8. A change in departmental leadership took place in September 2012 with Jeremy Hunt's appointment as Secretary of State. The department is adjusting to its new positioning as 'steward' of the NHS, to supporting the Secretary of State in his stance as patient champion, especially so following Mid Staffs, and to its changed role in public health.
- 1.9. The significance of these system changes and DH's recent restructure and headcount reduction was emphasised by most of those interviewed. The Permanent Secretary described DH's new role as one where it has become very much 'a relationship organisation'.
- 1.10. The role that communication plays for DH includes:
 - Explaining and supporting its new role and the structures more widely to both the NHS and the public health spheres. Key audiences include professionals working in the health sector;
 - Supporting the Secretary of State in his chosen role as patient champion;
 - Driving through his priority reforms, in particular: compassionate care; dementia; mortality and technology, and a cross-cutting focus on improvements for the vulnerable elderly;
 - Running campaigns to support other departmental programmes; and
 - Supporting the department as it deals reactively with health related events, including media coverage of the impact of budget pressures.
- 1.11. DH's communications division has recently been re-configured. It has reduced in size from 155 FTE plus almost 40 embedded communications staff to approximately 100 FTE today. This number includes the very recently transferred External Partnerships stakeholder team but excludes internal communications which is located in a different group.



Findings

Summary

- 1.12 The reviewers recognised the enormity of the changes that have taken place across the NHS system, within public health, and at DH. They were left with the impression that six months later there was still a lot of ‘work in progress’, both within DH and in particular its newer arm’s length bodies. However the new structures are now in place so the review team has suggested some fairly ambitious communication capability improvement goals for the next six and 12 months. The recommendations prioritise strategic communication in order to achieve meaningful longer-term term goals across the Secretary of State’s key priority areas. Much needed progress is now beginning to be made in planning and objective-setting.
- 1.13 Taking this need for action into account, the review team was impressed overall with the communications team, its director, the Media Centre, and in particular, digital communication capability. It is one of the strongest teams in Whitehall. But they felt that departmental leadership needs to provide clearer pointers about DH’s role and to use internal communications to explain this better. Stakeholder communication needs better focus and to be integrated with specific business priorities. The communications leadership team under the director needs strengthening.

Positives

- 1.14 The reviewers were immediately struck by the focus and sense of prioritisation that the Secretary of State’s emphasis on communication has given the department.
- 1.15 The reviewers heard very positive feedback, in the main, about the ‘Media Centre’, DH’s media relations unit. The sheer volume of media enquiries and the intensity of media scrutiny present it with a formidable challenge. Although praise was not unanimous, one or two interviewees considered the team among the best in Whitehall.
- 1.16 The reviewers also heard positive feedback about the DH Director of Communications, who has been in post for two years (as at December 2013). This was both in terms of his professional skills and also in terms of his leadership and his hands-on, approachable style. He enjoys the trust of the senior leadership among officials and ministers.
- 1.17 The department’s digital capability was also assessed as being very strong. In a recent digital communication capability review, reviewers rated DH’s offer as one of the best in Whitehall. This team has now been split more formally, with half of it focused on the department’s digital transformation programmes, such as digital services, and the other half responsible for communication and engagement.
- 1.18 The reviewers were impressed with what they saw of the beginnings of a strategic communication planning process, and the team leading this is strong.



Areas for improvement

- 1.19 The reviewers felt that DH's strategic communication, in particular with priority stakeholders, had scope for improvement and development. Three factors were behind this.
- 1.19.1 First, the **change in DH's role and the creation of new arm's length bodies** has sometimes resulted in a lack of clarity about respective roles. Communications tends to amplify any ambiguity about roles and highlight any poor co-ordination efforts.
- 1.19.2 Second, the reviewers thought that a **more strategic, longer-term approach to DH communication**, including stakeholder engagement, is much needed. The over-riding focus hitherto has been on shorter term, tactical and reactive media issue management. Work on communication objectives strategy is now underway.
- 1.19.3 And third, the specialist External Partnerships **stakeholder team** and the National Stakeholder Forum (the NSF) feels at a remove from the department's most pressing business priorities. Presently this team is as much a delivery unit of the NSF as it is an advisory unit, which the review team feel is the wrong focus.
- 1.20 Each of these issues is known to DH and is being addressed. We will take each in turn.
- The complex new operating model of ALBs and other public bodies has yet to fully bed down. This is a wider issue than purely communications. Greater clarity over roles and boundaries must be driven by the executive leadership team. At the communications level there is an over-reliance on high-level protocols and, though they are important, strong personal relationships at a senior communications level. Deeper understanding of organisational roles and closer ways of working across teams is needed, more widely than at Director of Communications level. Internal communications can play a vital part in clarifying roles and responsibilities and for setting out what DH's position as a strategic body and a steward of the NHS means in practice.
 - The policy communications team's communication strategy and planning function, needs to be better understood across the department, as does the end-benefits of its work. The role that communication can play in helping to achieve DH's *longer-term* departmental business objectives needs to be supported at executive board level. The reviewers suggest that, when drafted, the communications strategy should be submitted for sign-off at this level and progress reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Currently many in the department, even at the most senior levels, are not aware of what the policy communications function does. This would help it to realise its potential as the planning, strategy and project management heart of the communications division.



- The External Partnerships stakeholder team has just been made a part of the communications division. Its role should be re-examined, with a view to it being significantly re-configured around the Secretary of State's communication priorities.

1.21 The very recent appointment of a new Deputy Director for policy communications was welcomed by the reviewers, and it seemed much needed. Nonetheless the reviewers noted that the communications division has recently lost and is about to lose more of its senior leadership team: the head of marketing left in April for PHE; it is losing its head of news and its deputy head of news is taking up a new role. A new head of news will have to earn the trust of senior leaders and ministers. In addition, the deputy director of digital communications now has a reporting line outside of the communications division. These changes come at a critical time, prompting the reviewers to question whether the senior communication team at DH has sufficient weight and resilience over the next six months.

1.22 Internal communications was seen by many at DH as much improved over the last few years. However the function is now in need of enhancement, as the change programme moves into a new phase. More professional communications skills are needed, for example in clarifying DH's role relative to Arm's Length Bodies, and to make the most of a much improved intranet, due in early 2014. It should be brought closer the day to day business of the department, as reported on by the media centre.

Recommendations

1.23 This report has five main recommendations.

- i. **Support communication strategy development.** DH's forthcoming in-depth communication strategy, currently under development by the policy communications team, will significantly improve the department's communications capability. Not only will the strategy clarify the role and focus of communication against the department's key priorities, it will also help co-ordinate messages within the department, and with its executive agencies and arm's length bodies. The reviewers recommend that the strategy should be submitted for sign off at Executive team and at Board level, with progress formally reviewed on a quarterly basis, using appropriate evaluation data. As a part of this process, DH should re-position its policy communications team to put it right at the heart of the communications division.
- i. **Ensure more integrated working across DH and its ALB group.** Building on the recent co-ordination efforts which led to the production of an integrated winter pressures campaign, and using the forthcoming communication strategy, DH communications should be able to work increasingly closely with its key ALBs. The development of a pan DH and ALB communication strategy for 2014/15, as above, would represent a milestone in this process.



- ii. **Stakeholder communication.** The External Partnerships stakeholder team should be seamlessly integrated within the communication division, organised around the department's strategic objectives and tasked to work as advisers not deliverers. Arguably, it should merge with the policy communications team to ensure this happens. Its successful transformation will require strong leadership within the stakeholder team.
 - iii. **Communications leadership team.** The communications division should take steps to ensure that it has adequate SMT weight, authority and resilience to see it through the next nine to 12 months, supporting its extremely stretched director. The reviewers envisage DH can do this within its current overall pay envelope, through managing numbers overall.
 - iv. **Internal communications.** This function is much improved over the last two years. It has a crucial role in supporting the leadership team in clarifying DH's role in the NHS and public health systems, and it needs the best professional leadership to do this. The reviewers recommend that the function is given a refresh, there is staff interchange between it and external communications, and its position in the departmental structure is re-examined during 2014, with a view to close integration with the main communications team.
- 1.24 The main body of the report contains further recommendations. These include using some of the marketing expertise that resides in PHE to help refine and stress-test the new communications strategy. It also includes suggestions to ensure that progress in digital communication is maintained following the team splitting in two.



Actions

1.25 To achieve the outcomes intended by the report's recommendations, the reviewers have suggested some specific actions for implementation in six and 12 months

Item	Action in six months	Action in 12 months
Communications strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop communication strategy for Jan – March 2014 and FY 2014/5, signed off by SoS, Exec team and ALB CEOs. To be led by DG external relations and to include ALB communications. Assess skills of policy comms team and carry out professional development programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quarterly reporting dashboard for executive team, showing progress against key indicators. To be developed across DH and ALBs. Re-launch policy comms function for 2014/5 FY as lead on all non-news-related communications. Include new account management structure.
Working with key ALBs	Develop roles and responsibilities matrix for DH and ALB comms for 2014/5 FY. Sponsored by DG for strategy and external relations.	Evidence of close working between DH and ALB teams at comms level, with staff rotation, interchange, mentoring and professional development.
External Partnerships stakeholder team	Develop stakeholder communications strategy as part of the new communications strategy. This will require DG level sponsorship to ensure it is embedded across DH.	Merge stakeholder team with new policy comms team, and make stakeholder relations a core area for comms advice, not delivery. Re-orientate NSF to make it more outcomes orientated.
Communications division – added senior capability	Working with GCN, ensure that sufficient senior expertise is in place for the next 12 months or so, to enable strategic communications plan and evaluation to have traction across DH and its ALBs.	-
Internal communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-galvanise efforts to clarify DH's role respective to ALBs. Up-skill team, using external communications expertise; in particular digital & evaluation. 	Re-consider location of internal communications within the communications division.

