

**Communications Annual Report**  
**September 2017**

## Introduction

Our Communications Strategy sets out how we use communications to support the organisation to deliver on its statutory remit. The Board has produced a series of constitutional documents including setting out ARB's Purpose and Objectives and, from these, defining the ARB Statement of Priorities from 2017-2020. Our communications function is guided by these; we recognise that our stakeholder relationships and how we communicate with these groups is fundamental to the effective delivery of our regulatory functions.

In September 2014, the Board noted our Communications Strategy which sets out three key aims:

- i. To increase public and professional awareness of the role and functions of ARB.
- ii. To continue to raise awareness of the Register, specifically explaining to users of architectural services what registration means, and the importance of checking the Register before engaging an architect.
- iii. To extend the network of stakeholders to support ARB to deliver its business plan.

Each year the Board agrees a Business Plan which includes detailed objectives for the different areas of our regulatory role including how we will use communications to deliver on these. It also sets out specific communications objectives in relation to maintaining and building stakeholder relationships and developing our use of communications tools.

This report sets out the work undertaken to deliver on the business plan over the last twelve months.

## **Communications objectives in the 2017 business plan**

The business plan is divided into sections to reflect the different elements of our regulatory role – registration, qualifications, and professional standards. In addition to this the plan sets out a number of corporate objectives covering how the organisation is managed and governed. Communications objectives are woven throughout this document.

For example, maintaining the Register of Architects is a key part of our role and we use communications tools such as the ebulletin and social media messaging to encourage architects to keep their details up to date. We also adopt a proactive approach to building and maintaining stakeholder relationships reinforcing messages about the value of the Register as a tool which supports informed decision making.

In this way, the business plan sets out how we use communications to deliver on all aspects of our regulatory role. Additionally, it should be noted that whilst our communications activity is coordinated by the Communications Lead, it is an activity in which all staff partake to a lesser or greater extent, dependent on their respective roles. For example, both the Registration and the Professional Standards teams interact directly with architects and members of the public as part of their day to day work whilst the qualifications team liaises with Schools of Architecture and students.

Additionally, as a public body which has a duty to be transparent and accountable, we use communications to inform our stakeholders about our work and to place important information in the public domain.

## **Stakeholder relationships**

The maintenance and development of stakeholder relationships are crucial to the effective delivery of our work for two reasons.

***Facilitating cooperation and respect*** - Firstly, as a regulator we are required to operate in accordance with the principles of transparency and accountability. We must communicate our remit to those impacted by it so that they understand the purpose of regulation within the sector. If our stakeholders understand our role we are more likely to be able to operate within an atmosphere of cooperation and respect which leads to better outcomes for all.

***Extending our reach*** - Secondly, as a relatively small organisation, it is essential that we tap into the networks of our stakeholders (the piggy-back approach) in order to extend our reach beyond that of our own circle of contacts.

In this section, we set out what progress has been made in this area over the last twelve months with a particular focus on the individuals and organisations in the consumer/client sector as well as contacts at other regulators. Relationships with other stakeholders such as schools of architecture, professional bodies and government are covered regularly in the Operational Activity Report which is presented at every Board meeting.

We have benefitted from Board Member interest in stakeholder relationships and undertook a write round exercise to document suggestions from the Board. As a consequence of this we have been provided with a number of suggestions and we are in the process of contacting these at present.

## **Consumer and client stakeholders**

**Which?** – Following staff changes at Which? we have now re-established a constructive working relationship with this organisation. Which? is a consumer association, it has 680,000 members that subscribe to its magazine, and over 335,000 online subscribers.

We participated in a mutual work shadowing scheme organised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations which involved us hosting a member of staff from Which? as well as the Communications Lead spending time at their offices, meeting with different members of the team. We spoke to staff at Which? over a period of several months about how we are working to inform the public about the Register of Architects and the role of the regulator. This led to them adding two entries to their online advice guide which is accessible to all, not simply Which? members. The links are included below for your reference:

<http://www.which.co.uk/consumer-rights/advice/im-thinking-of-hiring-an-architect-what-do-i-need-to-know#what-you-need-to-do-to-protect-yourself>

<http://www.which.co.uk/consumer-rights/advice/how-to-complain-about-bad-architectural-work>

Staff at Which? have also said that they intend to include an article regarding architects in the September magazine as well as a comment piece on the Which? Conversation website, an online forum aimed at encouraging consumers to share experiences and advice.

**HomeOwners Alliance** – HomeOwners Alliance was established to champion the interests of Britain's homeowners and aspiring homeowners. It has members but also provides online advice which is available to all. In 2015, the HomeOwners Alliance website was visited 2.9 million times, and in the first six months of 2016, it logged over 1.9 million visits.

We continue to remain in contact with the HomeOwners Alliance. They wrote an advice piece for the Sunday Times in April 2017 for which we provided input. This was published on 16 April 2017 and included information about the ARB.

**Citizens Advice** – Citizens Advice provides free, confidential and independent advice to help people who are experiencing problems. In 2016-2017, it helped 2.7 million people face to face, over the phone, by email and webchat.

We recently established contact with the Operations Senior Officer at Citizens Advice regarding disseminating information to branch advisers. They have asked us to provide a briefing note setting out the key information so that they can roll this out to their advisers. Work is underway to produce this.

**Houzz** – Houzz is an international online home renovation platform for consumers and suppliers, enabling them to share images and information with a global online community of 40 million users. We have had several meetings with Houzz who have asked for access to data from the Register. As a result of requests such as these, in May 2017 the Board agreed a proposal to share data for regulatory purposes. We held a further meeting with Houzz in August 2017 to set out the Board's policy and to discuss whether it would be possible for Houzz to include information about registered status within architects' profiles on the Houzz website. Further discussions continue regarding this matter.

**Chartered Trading Standards Institute** – The Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) represents trading standards professionals in the UK and abroad and receives funding from both the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

We attended the 2017 Chartered Trading Standards Institute's (CTSI) conference in Harrogate in June 2017, this provided a unique opportunity to meet others who are working in the consumer protection sector to learn about recent developments. We are in the process of arranging a catch up meeting with the CTSI Chief Executive to see if we can connect with the trading standards network to share information about the Register and the regulation of architects.

### **Regulatory stakeholders**

**Staff networking objectives** – As part of the 2017 staff objective setting exercise all staff were given the objective of growing their network of regulatory contacts. This has been a particularly successful exercise with staff meeting colleagues from other regulators and contacts from professional bodies, who work on regulatory matters. For example members of the qualifications team went to the General Dental Council (GDC) to talk about prescription processes and members of the registration team visited both the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and the GDC to discuss best practice in registration. Other members of the staff team have attended Construction Industry Council Briefings which included a speech given by the then Minister, Gavin Barwell MP, on the Housing White Paper as well as presentations on projects such as HS2 and economic matters.

**Regulatory communications professionals** – We remain connected to several networks for communications professionals working for other regulators. One of these is a generic group which shares best practice information and advice online as and when required. As a result of this group the Communications Lead has been able to arrange follow up meetings with communications professionals from the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the General Dental Council.

Another network, established by the Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) is for regulators to discuss their approach to social media policy. We have attended two meetings of this group which provides an excellent forum for the sharing of advice and best practice.

A third group has recently been established for those responsible for managing regulator's websites. ARB's Operations Manager plans to attend the next meeting of this group. The Communications Lead also recently met with the General Medical Council's Head of Media and Campaigns to find out more about a survey they had conducted, asking those on the Medical Register for their views on the UK's decision to leave the EU.

**UK Inter-Professional Group (UKIPG)** – We are a member of the UK Inter-Professional Group, which has been rebranded as Professions Together. This is a network of organisations with a regulatory remit which currently provides us with a cost effective way of sharing a broad range of benchmarking information with peers in the wider regulatory sector. The Communications Lead continues to work with others to provide support for the redevelopment of the Professions Together website, which has enabled us to further develop our network of contacts in regulation. Professions Together organises a range of

interesting events including a Brexit discussion and sessions covering Continued Professional Development (CPD). It also co-hosts a forum for professional, statutory & regulatory bodies (PSRB), with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

One of the stakeholder's we met through Professions Together invited our Head of Professional Standards to speak at a meeting of a Regulation Special Interest Group later this year. This group is part of the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) and it will be discussing regulatory standards, managing complaints and disciplinary actions.

### **Equality and diversity groups**

**Architects for Change** – In June 2017, the Registrar and the Head of Professional Standards met with a number of members of RIBA's Architects for Change Group to explain more about the equality and diversity information we collect. They also spoke about how we use this information to ensure that our processes are not inadvertently discriminating against a particular individual or group.

**Architects Benevolent Society** – We continue to maintain an effective working relationship with the Architects Benevolent Society (ABS). During the 2017 retention fee collection exercise we sign-posted registrants who cited hardship to the ABS. This approach was effective and has resulted in ABS being able to support a number of people, who would otherwise have been unaware of the help on offer to them. We also recently attended the launch of a mental health support scheme for those in the architectural sector funded by ABS, the provider is Anxiety UK and the launch was hosted by the RIBA.

**Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust** – In January 2017, the Registrar and the Head of Professional Standards met with the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust's (SLCT) Development Manager. The discussion covered the equality and diversity make-up of the Register, particularly the low number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) architects. SLCT explained that they were planning an accreditation scheme for practices and we indicated, subject to Board approval, that ARB may be able to support this, as it would include an expectation that the practices involved would ensure that their architects provided E&D data to ARB. It was proposed that the Development Manager, Neil Onions, could attend a future post-Board session to give a presentation on the work of SLCT and this is scheduled to take place after the September Board meeting.

**Equality and diversity networks** – We continue to remain connected to a range of equality and diversity (E&D) networks in the construction sector which we tap into in order to share information about Board member and other appointments. These include the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) who have also provided cost-effective presentations/speaking skills training which was attended by a number of members of the staff team. In addition to this, NAWIC recently agreed to share a link to ARB's 2016 Annual Report with its members via its regular newsletter.

We are a member of LinkedIn groups for other networks for women in construction including Urbanistas, the Association of Women in Property and the Building Research Establishment's (BRE) Women's Network. We have also had contact with Freehold, a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender professionals working in the sector, and have asked about joining this network.

Additionally, the Head of Professional Standards attends an E&D cross-regulatory group which meets to share updates and best practice. Another area of focus is to develop relationships with E&D forums for consumer groups.

## **Members of the Public**

Over the last twelve months we have exhibited at four consumer shows – one Grand Designs Live event at the NEC in Birmingham and three Homebuilding and Renovating shows, one in London, one in Birmingham and another in Glasgow. These provide us with a unique opportunity to meet directly with members of the public. It has become clear from our discussions that many consumers are planning to undertake renovation or self-build projects. Many people tell us that they plan to use an ‘architect’ recommended by a builder, friend or estate agent. Upon checking, we often find that the person in question is not an architect and so we speak to visitors about the importance of checking the Register and making an informed choice about who to engage.

Over the course of the four shows we had in the region of 2900 visitors to the stand and gave out in the region of 1,500 copies of the Meeting your Architect form, the latter of which is always well received by consumers.

We also used a new pop up exhibition stand which matches the branding on our website and has been designed to reinforce our regulatory role.

## **Communications Tools**

### **Website**

In 2016 the staff team led a major project to redesign the main ARB website.

The project to refresh the website aimed to tackle a number of issues evident on the previous site which included duplicated information throughout the site, navigational problems and a lack of mobile compatibility which then affected the site’s search engine ranking.

In addition, the old site was designed on an outmoded platform, making it difficult and time consuming for staff to update. As a first stage duplicate pages were identified and deleted. A fresh look and feel was created. Outdated information was removed and a new navigation system was created, addressing the issues raised by our stakeholders. The site content was migrated to Wordpress, a popular and flexible platform which is user-friendly and easy to update, it is also compatible with many other plug-ins meaning that we have the option of adding further tools to the site as demand arises in the future.

The redesigned site was thoroughly tested and launched in April 2017. It was carefully monitored and where necessary, changes were made promptly. Generally feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with stakeholders commenting on the bold new look and feel.

According to the data collected, visits to the new site were down on the previous visitor numbers. Over the last twelve months there have been 172,793 unique visits, down 2.54% on the 177,298 unique visits logged in the previous year. This was investigated and it was found that previously visitor numbers were artificially inflated by crawlers visiting and then

immediately leaving the site. The new design resulted in a reduced bounce rate and longer visit times meaning that, whilst there were slightly fewer visits to the site, they were of a better quality with people staying on the site longer. Our website statistics also show that 76% of visitors accessed the main ARB site from desktop computers, 18% from mobile devices and the remaining 6% from tablets. With almost a quarter of visitors accessing the site via mobile devices the importance of producing mobile compatible resources where possible remains a clear priority for us going forward.

### **The Register**

A key element of our statutory role is to maintain an up-to-date Register. Visitor numbers to the online Register continue to rise with 225,168 unique visits over the last twelve months, up 11.4% from 202,193, reflecting the fact that this resource is a valuable tool for our stakeholders. The data shows that 66% of visitors accessed the Register from desktop computers, 22% from mobile devices and the remaining 12% from tablets. The online Register is a searchable database, allowing visitors to search for an architect by surname, area, company name or registration number. It contains current information drawn directly from the in-house Register. Whilst the Register has not yet been redesigned to reflect the look and feel of the new website, it is based on a simple layout and user feedback suggests navigation is straight forward. Nonetheless, it is not mobile compatible and this could impact on search rankings over time. Consequently, there are plans to redesign the online Register in 2018 which will seek to address the issues whilst keeping the elements that work well.

### **Annual Report 2016**

As a public body we are committed to operating in accordance with the values of transparency and accountability. In addition to the publication of Board papers and minutes, we also publish an Annual Report. This contains both the audited Annual Accounts and Financial Statements as well as narrative information about our regulatory role. It sets out how we have delivered against the objectives we set in our business plan and provides a range of statistical data regarding the Register and our wider work areas.

The 2016 Annual Report was published via a microsite on 31 July 2016 with registrants being alerted to its launch via an eblast message. This message received 12,798 unique opens with 1,638 clicking through to the Annual Report microsite. At the time of writing it was less than one month since the launch of this report and there had already been a total of 2,384 visits to the microsite, up a substantial 71% on the 1,394 first month visits for the 2015 Report. When creating the Annual Report site we were mindful of the trend (discussed above) towards accessing our websites from mobile devices, this led us to designing the Annual Report microsite in such a way that it is easy to navigate and view on phones and tablets. The rise in visitor numbers for the 2016 Annual Report site shows this decision was well founded with 20% using a mobile and 6% using a table to visit the microsite.

### **Ebulletin**

The ebulletin is an important tool for engaging directly with the profession although other stakeholders are also able to sign up to receive it and we encourage this. To date nearly 150 non-architects have signed up for the ebulletin with half of these being students and the

other half members of the public. The ebulletin is issued five times a year, after each Board meeting, and it contains updates on key areas of our work as well as a message from the Chair. In the last year, the average unique open rate was 11,941 with the most popular issue being the February 2017 ebulletin which clocked up 12,600 opens, 600 more than the most popular issue in the previous year. Notably the regular 'Dear Architect' column, providing information about professional conduct related matters continues to be the most popular with these articles clocking up a total of 3,170 views over the last five issues. Articles regarding the Code of Conduct also fared well, two ebulletins covered this subject with these pieces receiving 584 and 720 views respectively. Pieces relating to ARB appointments such as the Investigations Pool and Examiner vacancies are also well read, the September 2016 ebulletin included this information and these articles received 666 and 564 views respectively.

Each ebulletin also contains an 'Update your Details' feature which works well, it prompts recipients to update their contact details if their circumstances change. For example, in the week following the May 2017 ebulletin we received 345 contact detail changes compared to 71 the week before the ebulletin was issued.

### **Social media messaging**

We first established social media accounts towards the end of 2013. Since then we have worked hard to develop the use of these tools and our audiences now stand at:

	August 2017	August 2016	Percentage change
Twitter followers	1863	1544	20.7
Linkedin followers	2540	2142	18.6
Facebook likes	882	733	20.3
Google+ followers	97	93	4.3

These results show a solid 20% increase in audience numbers across Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. The growth of our Google+ audience is much slower although posting to Google+ is recognised to have other benefits in terms of search engine optimisation. Our audiences predominantly consisted of architects, students and those working within the sector so we tailor our messages to these groups. A key success in this regard has been the dissemination of messages during the retention fee collection period which worked particularly well on Twitter. We asked our contacts from professional bodies and the trade press to share these messages, they agreed and consequently in the last week of 2016 our retention fee messages on Twitter received 19.1 k views.

### **Online videos**

Our online videos, which we post via YouTube, continue to fair well with many of our audiences opting to access information in this format. Online videos were viewed 11,877 times in the last twelve months, up 25.4% from the 9,474 views logged in the previous year. Over the coming twelve months, we are looking to review these resources to ensure that the content is still up to date and where appropriate, refresh the look and feel of them to reflect the redesigned website.

### **Online resources**

We have previously developed several online resources for different stakeholders. The routefinder tool was put together to help applicants identify which route to registration applied to them, this continues to be well used with 2,953 visitors between September 2016 and the present day. Additionally, we created a 'Meeting your architect' tool for potential clients, this is a form which guides consumers through an initial meeting with an architect, advising them on what questions to ask with a view to avoiding problems later on, the data shows that this has been downloaded 259 times since April 2017. Additionally, as set out in the exhibitions section above, 1,500 hard copies were distributed at consumer shows between September 2016 and the present day with visitors being advised that they could download additional copies online as required.

### **Communications Projects**

#### **Tone of Voice**

A number of other regulatory bodies have taken steps to review and amend their tone of voice. We met with the GMC who advised us about a thorough and well considered project they had undertaken in this regard which focused on conveying the key information whilst considering the impact of the tone of voice on the recipient.

We established a project team consisting of others undertaking similar work in the sector, this was made up of representatives from the General Medical Council, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Architects Benevolent Society. We had a project kick off meeting to set out our aim and gain advice and input from the team. The insights we received covered a range of matters including the need to minimise the use of legal terminology where possible or including it as an appendix to correspondence as well as a suggestion to adopt an 'empathy filter' when drafting correspondence.

This was followed by an exercise which involved us circulating a number of standard letters and the team providing us with feedback on these, including how they could be interpreted and suggestions for change.

We are currently at the stage of redrafting our standard correspondence to reflect the advice received. These will then be circulated to the team and stakeholders from the professional bodies before we roll out the updated wording. The project team also seeks to establish an agreed set of guidelines to be used by the staff team when drafting text for a range of mediums with a view to establishing a consistent ARB house style.

#### **Local Authority Project**

Our work on the local authority project continues. This involves us contacting local authorities and asking them to include a link to the online Register or main ARB website on their planning webpages. This is a part of our objective to increase external links to the Register. For many consumers considering building projects the planning pages of Council websites are key sources of information and so getting links added to these sites enables us to reach a key target group. Multiple links to the Register from .gov domains is also recognised as having a positive impact on search engine rankings.

So far we have contacted 298 councils, out of a total of 418 on our target list. We have also made contact with the Planning Officers Society, a network for public sector planning practitioners. We spoke at their London branch meeting and we have been invited to speak at the next meeting of the executive team.

We have had much success with the local authority project. In September 2016 41 councils included such a link, this has now risen to 98 local authorities. Over recent months we contacted all the councils in Northern Ireland and we are about to contact all of the Scottish local authorities.

### **Projects to Raise Awareness of Registered Status and the Register**

Staff task and finish groups have been working on projects to raise awareness of the registered status of architects and the statutory Register. These initiatives have focused on encouraging architects to use the logo and link to their individual pages on the Register. The success of these initiatives is reflected in the increase in visits to the logo webpage and downloads of logo files. From September 2016 to the present day, visits to the logo webpage stood at 2,850, up 28.4% from 2,220 for the previous twelve month period. The functionality to log downloads of the logo has only recently been added and since April 2017 there have been a total of 730 downloads of all logo files. We have driven traffic to these resources by creating a new email signature raising awareness of the logo as well as articles in the ebulletin and social media messages.

### **Measuring impact**

Our conversations with other public bodies including regulators and consumer panels have highlighted the importance of measuring and showing the impact of regulatory communications. Many organisations have advised us that they undertake research to obtain baseline stakeholder awareness data so that improvements can be gauged and approaches adjusted accordingly. Whilst we currently use data regarding visits and views as proxy information from which we draw conclusions, the logical next step is for us to undertake research to obtain this information as a reference point from which to review and refine our communications activity.

### **Key communications messages**

It is important that we are consistent in our approach to our communications, reinforcing our messaging across our channels. As such we have developed a number of communication themes:

**Our role as a regulator** – Stakeholders are at times unclear on the fundamentals of a regulators role, on occasion confusing it with the work of a professional body. As such we regularly include messages regarding our regulatory remit. When we receive enquiries, typically from the press, regarding matters which relate to broader issues of promoting architecture or government policy these are referred to our partners at professional bodies or in government.

An important aspect of our regulatory role is our duty to inform architects about their regulatory responsibilities, as set out in the Code of Conduct, so that registrants understand

what this means in practice. Architects are noticeably interested in professional standards matters. This is reflected in the consistently high readership of the Dear Architect ebulletin column as well as articles relating to the Code. A press contact has also advised us that trade press articles relating to professional conduct cases are typically popular with readers. It is important that we continue to include information about the Code and common causes of complaints so that the profession have information about appropriate conduct and competence to reduce the incidence of complaints for the benefit of architects and consumers alike.

**Informed choice** – Consumers are free to choose who they wish to engage to work on their properties. As a regulator, we don't say that the public must use an architect or recommend individual architects, rather our focus is on facilitating informed choice. We work hard to convey that the title architect is protected and that only those on the Register can refer to themselves in this way.

**Registered status** – Closely linked to the above theme is our objective to encourage architects to refer to their registered status either by using the logo or linking to their unique page on the Register. As set out earlier in this report, we are undertaking projects to encourage consumer organisations and local authorities to inform the public about the Register. The other side of the coin is to encourage those on the Register to refer to their registered status. We do not have the power to compel registrants to do this but, with the Register now standing at almost 40,000 architects, if the profession took this step it would increase the public's awareness of the difference between registered and unregistered professionals.

**Business as usual** – Over the last twelve months, there have undoubtedly been some major developments which relate to the profession, including the publication of the government's report into the periodic review and public debate regarding how the UK's decision to leave the EU could impact on the construction sector.

We provide stakeholders with information regarding our work in relation to these matters. For example, the FAQs we produced following the UK's decision to leave the EU have been viewed 3923 times since they were published in July 2016.

The updates we provide are set within the context of the fact that the Architects Act 1997 and other relevant EU legislation remains in place and that we will continue to deliver business as usual and await further advice from our sponsoring government department, the Department for Communities and Local Government.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the past twelve months has seen significant progress in the area of communications. Notably the project to evaluate, redesign and launch the new website has improved our information offering to stakeholders. Additionally work to encourage consumer organisations and local authorities to link to the Register, and thus spread the word about architects as regulated professionals, has been an area of substantial progress.

As such, it would be timely to undertake some research to understand and evaluate stakeholder awareness of ARB and the regulation of the profession. This would allow us to undertake a further stage of stakeholder engagement activity. It would enable us to select messages and tools to meet the needs of the audiences thus ensuring the best use of the resources available to us.

We are also currently undertaking a substantial pre-consultation and evidence gathering exercise in relation to the business as usual reviews of the Criteria and Procedures for the Prescription of Qualifications. A communications plan is being developed which will see the publication of a consultation on the website as well as roundtable discussions with students, practitioners and academics across the UK.

As a relatively small organisation we have achieved much with the resources we have to hand. We are committed to further developing our stakeholder engagement activity by reviewing and refreshing our tools and messages so that we maintain momentum and continue to deliver successes in this important element of our work.