

Architects Registration Board Communications Strategy

Introduction

Effective communication is key to the work of the Architects Registration Board (ARB), enabling the organisation to build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders and protect the reputation of the profession for the benefit of consumers and architects alike. There are around 34,000 architects on the statutory Register, who have undertaken many years of study to achieve their professional status. ARB needs an open, honest dialogue with stakeholders to maintain public confidence in the profession by protecting the users and potential users of architect's services and support architects through registration.

ARB's mission

ARB is the body set up by Parliament as the independent UK regulator of architects. Anyone in business or practice, who describes themselves as an architect, must be registered with us. Our duties and responsibilities for regulating architects are set out in the 1997 Architects Act. Our mission is to keep the statutory Register and to ensure standards within the profession are maintained for the benefit of the public and architects.

Our key functions are:

- Keep an up-to-date Register of architects.
- Decide what qualifications are needed to become an architect.
- Set standards for education and professional practice.
- Investigate complaints about an architect's conduct or competence.
- Make sure that only people on the Register use the name 'architect' in business or practice.

ARB's overarching goals

The Board has identified two objectives from the Act which underpin all of our work:

- Protect the users and potential users of architects' services.
- Support architects through regulation.

These objectives are the foundations of ARB's 2014 business plan which identifies specific aims against which performance is measured. Broadly these aims are:

- To maintain the quality of and access to the Register.
- To maintain the qualifications of architects.
- To maintain the standards of conduct and practice of architects.
- To raise public awareness of the Register and help users and potential users of architects' services to make informed choices.

ARB's communications activity will work at all times to support the delivery of these aims and objectives.

Communications achievements to date

Much has already been achieved; ARB maintains strong links with the profession both directly and through the professional bodies. ARB also has excellent relationships with students and schools of architecture. Furthermore, steps to raise public awareness of the Register through the development of an online, accessible Register and the re-launched website have been extremely successful.

Key communications aims

Our key communications aims for the future are:

- 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.

ARB's audiences

ARB's audiences encompass a diverse range of interested parties who have the potential to be affected by our work.

These stakeholders typically fall into one of three groups:

- i) Users of architectural services, who the ARB works to inform, maintain confidence in the profession and provide an agency for the investigation of complaints about professional misconduct or incompetence;
- ii) Architects, who ARB regulates to protect the professional status of the profession;
- iii) Students and potential students of architecture.

Consumers - We have responded to the needs of consumers by making our services more accessible. We have created an online Register and a new look website. We are working hard to build links with bodies representing the spectrum of consumer interests including homeowners, businesses and the public sector.

Architects - The ARB has well established communication channels for reaching the 34000 architects on the statutory Register. We work hard to send registrants information in formats which they find most useful. We are also committed to maintaining and developing relationships with the professional bodies including the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Association of Consultant Architects, the Royal Incorporation Of Architects In Scotland, the Royal Society of Architects in Wales and the Royal Society of Ulster Architects and other bodies who deal with different specialisms such as the Register of Architects Accredited in Building Conservation.

Students and potential students - We communicate directly with students who require information about prescribed courses; equivalence and ARB exams. We have strong relationships with the schools and institutions of architecture, who deliver prescribed qualifications.

These three broad groups cover large numbers of people but there are other very distinct entities who are also key stakeholders including UK government; European institutions and European counterparts; other regulators and other organisations operating in the design and construction sector.

ARB recognises that not all stakeholders are proactive communicators, neither are they all well-represented nor well-resourced. As an independent statutory regulator, we are also committed to seeking out and responding to the voices of less heard groups.

Our audiences and how we will reach them

We want our audiences to hear about, be able to respond to and value the work of ARB. Our strategy for this includes:

Expanding the communications tools we use

- Recognising that different stakeholders access information through different mediums, we are working to improve our use of existing communication tools and expand the mediums we use.
- Developing a new look ebulletin with headline stories and clickable links which is easier to navigate and appeals to a wider audience.
- We have created a new look website with distinct sections for different stakeholder groups and we will continue to review and improve the content available on this.
- We have established a presence on social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and are working to use these to generate open communication channels with a wide-ranging group of people and organisations.

Expanding the resources available to stakeholders

- Informing stakeholders about what we do and providing them with information which can help them in a timely, accessible way.
- Building on the existing resources we provide to architects, students and consumers - providing literature, events and information in formats which reflect the needs of the users.
- Reviewing and streamlining the resources available to external audiences on an on-going basis.

Build working relationships with opinion formers

- Developing relationships with external audiences who affect and could be affected by the actions of ARB.
- Targeting resources at reaching key stakeholders so that we are operating efficiently and effectively, and with maximum impact.
- Meeting directly with targeted organisations to explore how we can work together to the mutual benefit of the profession and users and potential users of architects' services.
- Building on existing contacts within the trade press to promptly answer their enquiries and working to develop new press contacts with the wider national press.
- Identifying ARB spokespeople who can communicate both the organisation's role and its positions on different issues.
- Consulting stakeholders, regarding significant changes to ARB's work.

An equality and diversity focus

ARB is an inclusive organisation. It has an equality scheme in line with the Government's public sector equality duty. ARB's communications will continue to be based on the principle of promoting equality of opportunity for everybody who has dealings with us, irrespective of their race, gender, disability, religion, belief system, sexual orientation or age.

In 2014, we will undertake an equality data collection exercise covering applicants, registrants and complainants, in a cost-effective and non-intrusive way. The data will be available to assist and inform both the Board and ARB's stakeholders in formulating policies and in any decision-making processes. The ARB Board is currently exploring how best to publish equality data to ensure it is used as effectively as possible. We will continue to explore what other regulators and similar organisation do to ensure we are aware of best practice.

Internal communications

We support a communications culture which facilitates openness and encourages the sharing of ideas across the organisation. Our strategy for this includes:

- Supporting ARB's Board and leadership team to communicate ARB's work priorities to the staff team.
- Facilitating a two-way internal communications infrastructure which enables the staff team to understand and deliver on the Board's decisions as well as advising the Board where appropriate.
- Enabling staff to communicate the organisation's remit and the Board's policy decisions and strategy within agreed parameters. This has become particularly important given the impact technology has had on increasing the pace of communications.
- Empowering staff to use the communications tools available to them, and to enable them to communicate in an effective and responsible manner which reflects the culture of ARB.
- Ensuring all staff are aware of and buy into ARB's operating framework for communications (see below).
- Developing internal channels such as the weekly standing meeting, team meetings and distribution lists to ensure staff get the information they require in a timely manner whilst at the same time providing staff with the opportunity to ask for further information and clarification when required.
- Promoting ARB as a great employer with a professional, engaging culture and a committed staff team.

An operating framework for our communications

We will deliver this ARB communications strategy in a way that is:

Honest and with integrity - We will communicate our successes in protecting professional standards and safeguarding the interests of users of architectural services and the general public. We will actively seek feedback from those who use our services, listen to criticism and respond appropriately.

Open and transparent - We will provide the public with information and advice about the profession (qualifications, professional standards and the Register) using the most appropriate communications channels available to do this.

Cost effective - We will plan and undertake all communications cost effectively. We will reduce costs by using digital information and tools where appropriate and we will build relationships with organisations who can help us disseminate our messages to key audiences.

Proportionate and constructive – We will always retain awareness of the context and time within which we are communicating and communicate in a targeted and timely manner.

Clear and consistent - All communications will be in plain English so that they can be easily understood. They will also be branded, timely and up to date.

Approachable – We will develop ARB’s reputation as an accessible organisation, communicating our regulatory purpose clearly to our different stakeholders so that they understand our remit and how we can support them.

Evaluating our communications performance

We want to be open about the impact of this communications strategy:

- We will publish our annual communications plan and key objectives as part of ARB’s annual business plan.
- We will set Key Performance Indicators for our communications work (which support those of the wider organisation).
- Overall measures of performance will evaluate whether the three core communications objectives have been met. So, measures of success will look for evidence to demonstrate: i) increased awareness of the ARB and its role; ii) increased visitor flow to the online Register and the website and iii) demonstrable positive outcomes achieved through stakeholder relationship building and the joint working which results from this.
- We will proactively review and seek feedback on our progress on the objectives outlined in our communications plan to identify strengths and weaknesses for example consulting our audiences through surveys, focus groups and other meetings.
- We will build on successes and modify our approach in areas where we could do more.
- We will report on our progress on achieving the objectives set out in the communications plan. ARB wants to drive high performance in communications and be open about how we perform against our communications objectives each year so that we can adjust our approach accordingly.