

# Paper C1

Communications and Editorial Committee  
The review of the communications  
department  
October 2013 – July 2015

United Church 2015  
Church 2015  
Reformed Church 2015  
Church 2015



# Paper C1

## Communications & Editorial Committee

### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	Peter Knowles <a href="mailto:peterwknowles@gmail.com">peterwknowles@gmail.com</a>
<b>Action required</b>	None. Information only.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	The report on the review of the communications department at Church House – looking to identify the services provided by and resources available to the department, considering the extent to which they meet the current and future needs of the denomination in order to recommend and implement appropriate change.
<b>Main points</b>	An overview of the recently completed review of the communications department – looking at the department's seven discrete work areas.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	None.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The communications and editorial committee; departments staff; the deputy general secretary (administration and resources).

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	The department has requested a small increase in its budget to fund the work the denomination requires of its communications department.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	None.

# The review of the communications department

## October 2013 – July 2015

### Introduction – setting the scene for the review:

1. Having been asked to step in as convenor of the communications and editorial (c&e) committee when the person initially appointed withdrew, I (John Humphreys) reported that there were concerns to be addressed in the communications department. The issues were not only internal to the department, but the department was significantly affected by issues from beyond its bounds. When the Revd Martin Hazell was called by a pastorate, the convenor encouraged the committee to develop its understanding of the department's work and professionalism of its staff, to meet and become proactive. When Martin left, at the end of September 2013, Gill Nichol agreed to be the interim director of communications.
2. The committee was delighted when Gill Nichol was appointed to the permanent post of Head of Communications. Throughout the 10 months that Gill was interim director the department and committee improved in morale with a clearer understanding of the staffing and the work they do.
3. In October 2013, right at the start of Gill's time as interim director, the committee decided to take the opportunity presented by the interim appointment to embark on a review of the department, initially looking at each area of work individually.
4. Gill Nichol had been a member of the department since October 2009 and her transparent and open style of management, her commitment to the department staff and their work and her strong desire to improve both the working life of her staff team, and the quality of the work output, resulted in improvements in relationships and reputation.

*John Humphreys*

*Former convenor of the communications & editorial committee (until July 2015)*

### The purpose of the review:

5. The purpose of the review was to identify both the services provided by, and the resources available to, the department and to consider the extent to which they meet the current and future needs of the URC in order to recommend and implement appropriate change.

### Our mission statement

6. The process started with the creation of a statement to describe the purpose and priorities of the department. In early 2014 the committee started drafting a mission statement and at the November 2014 meeting of Mission Council the following was presented and formally ratified:

*The communications department exists to promote effective communication and celebration of the Gospel in and beyond the URC by:*

- *Giving voice to good news*
- *Facilitating regional/national communications*
- *Supporting the communications of Church House departments and General Assembly*
- *Resourcing the local churches.*

7. There are seven discrete areas of activity covered by this review:

8. **One: The press and media office**

8.1 **Overview:** The office is staffed by one full-time press & media officer (PMO) and a 0.4 support role in the form of a PA to the press & media office. The current head of communications also plays a role in the delivery of the press & media work, most specifically in the department's 'reputation management' work and as holiday cover for the PMO.

8.2 **Findings/outcome of review:** The office is responsible for a very wide range of communications activity, both internal and external. It includes the writing of news releases, web reflections and the *News Update* (NU) and the delivery of communications training to local churches. In the past two years we have worked hard to be more proactive in our media work e.g. our work as a communications partner in Christian Aid's 2014 and 2015 Christmas campaigns. This has added significantly to the workload of the office.

8.3 There is an ever increasing demand for press and media services. The office plays an active role in the communications work of the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT), is increasingly called upon to provide media and communications support for other Church House departments and is committed to the best possible use of the denomination's social media channels.

8.4 The vital 'reputation management' work is shared with the Head of Communications. There are times when the demands of this work can put a strain on the rest of the activities of the PMO and of the Head of Communications. There has been an increase in the number of 'historic' cases of alleged abuse which have come to light. The challenge becomes particularly severe when the office is juggling more than one reputation management case at the same time.

8.5 **Changes made in the press & media office:**

8.5.1 **Technology:** Aware of the need to make best possible use of the available technology we have, in the past 18 months, invested in software to help improve our service – namely hootsuite (a dashboard for social media activity) and dotmailer (a bulk email marketing package).

8.5.2 **Staffing changes:** In order to provide more flexible admin support to the department without increasing cost, the part-time PA to the press office post will be combined with the PA to the head of comms post.

## 9. **Two: *Reform* magazine**

- 9.1 **Process:** The work of *Reform* has been thoroughly reviewed by the committee and its financial position ratified by Mission Council.
- 9.2 **Overview:** The magazine is enjoyed and appreciated by many who regard it as the ‘flagship’ of the denomination but it has been criticised by some who see it as an expensive luxury. And let us not forget how *Reform* is viewed by many outside the United Reformed Church. The theologian Robert Beckford has said: ‘*Reform* is a prophetic voice’ and Christina Rees of the Church of England’s General Synod called it: ‘One of the most intelligent, relevant and helpful Christian publications around’.
- 9.3 In 2011 Mission Council agreed to support *Reform* (from central denominational funds) for a total of £90K a year, to be reviewed after three years. It has been hoped that, during those three years the reliance on the subsidy would lessen – but this has not happened and by 2013 the subsidy was still an essential part of *Reform*’s budget.
- 9.4 In autumn 2013 the need to increase subscriptions and boost *Reform*’s marketing was at the top of the agenda of the head of department, the *Reform* staff team and the committee. Time and energy were put into the planning and execution of a marketing drive and the committee started discussing the sustainability – or otherwise – of the magazine; this culminated in the committee paper submitted to Mission Council in November 2014.
- 9.5 During this time the *Reform* editorial board, which had not met for several years, was reinstated (the first meeting took place in January 2015 and it will continue to meet twice a year) and a small, mainly internal, group, was formed to discuss and develop marketing initiatives.
- 9.6 ***Reform* and Mission Council**  
Paper C3: The future for *Reform* was on the agenda at the November 2014 meeting of Mission Council. During the debate, *Reform* (and the wider department) received widespread support from the members of Mission Council. Mission Council passed the following resolution:
- 9.7 *Mission Council notes that the communications and editorial committee and staff team are focussed on increasing the number of subscriptions to the magazine, and committed to developing, and monitoring the use of, Reform within the United Reformed Church over the three-year period from January 2015 to December 2017. Mission Council therefore resolves to support Reform by continuing with the current annual subsidy – not to exceed £90,000 in any one budget year – for the next three budget years; and asks the communications and editorial committee to present up-to-date subscription numbers to Mission Council in March 2016.*
- 9.8 **Post-Mission Council**  
Clearly Mission Council’s support for *Reform* gave a boost to the staff team, and the head of department, but it also crystallised the need for all parts of the magazine’s operation to be reviewed alongside the continuation of the increase in marketing activity. From this came two specific changes: In March 2015 *Reform* moved its outsourced subscription processing to a new provider to enable a more versatile and sophisticated service and in April 2015 the digital edition of the magazine was launched. Alongside these changes there have been several focused marketing initiatives including: a half-price digital

subscription offer for students, an introductory three-issues-for-£1 direct debit offer as well as tailored subscription offers put together for synod and other URC meetings. It is early days, and whilst the decline in subscriptions is slowing down, we have not yet turned it round. *Reform* is on a firmer footing than it was 18 months ago, the implemented changes have been positive and provide the foundation for the increase in subscriptions that we need to achieve to secure the magazine's future. We are next due to report to Mission Council in March 2016.

## 10. **Three: The URC website**

10.1 **Overview:** Up until December 2013 the website was staffed by a succession of temporary staff working either full-time or on a 0.8 contract. The staff were from a specialist agency and were very expensive. We also used VTS, a provider of web support services. In December 2013 the last of these 'temps' was given notice and in January 2014 the senior graphic designer took on responsibility for the management of the URC website on an interim basis. This, with the ongoing support of VTS, was a cost-effective solution to an immediate challenge.

10.2 **Findings/outcome of review:** The website is not at the standard expected and needed by the United Reformed Church, and is not, in the view of both committee and department, adequately resourced. The committee and the department acknowledge the growing expectations around – and need for – high quality and easily accessible resources for the local United Reformed churches (both on and offline). It is committed to providing what the Church needs and is scheduling this into its work plan for 2016.

10.3 The staffing solution outlined in the overview section works well much of the time but occasionally runs into problems when the current (and urgent) demands of the design role do not allow the necessary focus on web work. That said, urgent work on the website, even when 'out-of-hours', is *always* done.

10.4 **Future plans:** In spring 2015 we asked VTS to move the URC website onto a more stable platform and to examine restructuring key sections of the website. This has taken longer than expected but is ongoing and the move to a stable platform completed by October 2015. The current Head of Communications and PMO have the skills and expertise needed to produce the written content for website and, when VTS have completed the work to move the URC website onto a more stable platform, attention will be given to improving/rewriting website copy.

10.5 In the light of the above, the department has asked for a small increase in the website budget of £5,000 in 2016.

## 11. **Four: The publications office**

11.1 **Overview:** In October 2013 the publications office was facing an uncertain future. The publications office had been allowed to run down and since the closure of the bookshop and the resultant redundancies of bookshop staff it had been staffed by a succession of temporary staff.

11.2 **Findings/outcome of review:** During the review process it became clear that the committee and departmental staff were confident that the publications office *did* have a future and that time and effort should be invested in to it. The committee began work on a publications strategy and spent much time considering the future resourcing of, and possibilities for, URC publications. The committee carefully considered the type of books the department would



publish and took the decision to re-establish the publications board. The job description for the part-time post was also substantially changed, widening the brief of the role to include administering the production schedule of manuscripts being prepared for publication and involvement in the marketing of URC publications and merchandise as well as increasing the authority delegated to it. HRAG have agreed to this becoming a three-day a week post with a new job title of publications co-ordinator. Recruitment to this post is scheduled for autumn/winter 2015. This is an exciting development in the life of the department, and one which the committee and head of department feel very positive about.

## 12. **Five: The graphics office and print room**

- 12.1 **Overview:** The graphics office and print room are both exceedingly busy. In graphics the volume of work has grown significantly and design effort is 'booked in' several months in advance. As a result some design work has to be sent to external designers – the graphics office is currently compiling a costed list of the work that has been outsourced in the past 12 months. During the last twelve months the graphics office has developed a house style for a series of URC information booklets (for example this department's training booklets) and, as more booklets are produced this style will be rolled out further. A house font is also under consideration. There are two full-time members of staff: a graphic designer and a printer & print estimator.
- 12.2 **Findings/outcome of review:** It is clear that to meet current service demands more design resource is needed, although there is currently no budget to employ another designer. We are seeking solutions to this challenge in two ways – looking at ways to control the demand for design and print as well as possibilities for increasing the resource.
- 12.3 We are investigating the recruitment of a graphic intern – a paid internship (dependent on Mission Council approval of the draft budget for 2016).
- 12.4 The Head of Communications is actively seeking invitations to work with committees and Church House departments to talk through their communications needs. We are absolutely committed to providing a high-quality service that will help the committees, and the wider denomination, to communicate effectively with their audiences. We also know that managing demand is key and that we are not able to service every demand that is made of us – this applies equally to the graphics and print, website, press & media and copywriting requests. The Head of Communications is also looking to establish a fair, acceptable and accepted, process for prioritising requests for communications input.
- 12.5 **Changes made in the graphics office:** In July 2014 *Reform's* graphic designer started working for two days a month in the graphics office; he has undertaken a variety of jobs and boosted his skill base. An increase in his days in the graphics office is currently being considered.
- 12.6 The job descriptions of both staff members have been reviewed and significantly amended to reflect the current scope of their roles.

13. **Six: The database**  
This post has not been formally reviewed, but its work is being considered alongside the requirement to replace the database. It is probable that in the future this role will not be part of the communications department.
14. **Seven: The despatch office**  
14.1 The role and function of the despatch clerk were reviewed at the retirement of the long-term post holder in December 2013. The appointment of his successor in January 2014 provided the opportunity to computerise the office and modernise the despatch processes. This has been successful: despatch work is carried out efficiently and economically with the current post holder working on a 0.4 contract.
15. **Management and Support:**  
15.1 **The general office (PA to the Head of Communications)**  
The general office is staffed by the PA to the Head of Communications, working 21 hours a week. General admin work, most noticeably the processing of financial paperwork, the support of the C&E committee and the handling of all copyright queries, take up the bulk of the time available. The three-day a week post is adequate for the defined needs but it gives no scope to develop this role, or to increase the work undertaken.
16. **Conclusion:** I (*Peter*) have been on the C&E committee since July 2014 and, in that time have seen a changing department. The department we have now is better run, more efficient and more effective, than it was two years ago.
17. I believe this review has been realistic and optimistic. There are no limits to the resources that can be expended in this field but the committee understands very clearly that there are limits to the resources available! The department continues to fine-tune its activities and its deployments to make the best use of those resources in pursuit of its agreed aims and the staff at Church House work hard, often beyond their contracted hours, to deliver.
18. I look forward to working with the staff team and committee in developing new and neglected areas of work. The website clearly needs further work to make it fit for purpose and there are great opportunities to be pursued in supporting the profile of the denomination at national level and in resourcing the public life of local churches.
19. I'm proud, as the incoming convenor, of the work done by this department and pleased to note the great goodwill on the part of staff and the active support of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable committee.

*Gill Nichol, Head of Communications*

*Peter Knowles, Convenor of the communications & editorial committee*

*Peter Knowles, Convenor of the Communications & Editorial committee*

*August 2015*