



Strategy 2022–2032

Introduction

The Science Media Centre (SMC) is an independent charity. It was founded in 2002. In 2012, to mark the SMC's tenth anniversary, a [major strategy review](#) was carried out. In 2022, the year of the SMC's twentieth anniversary, the exercise has been repeated. This paper sets out the results of the review, and the revised strategy that has arisen from it. The SMC's Board of Trustees approved and adopted this new strategy in October 2022.

As with the previous review, the 2022 exercise examined the SMC's mission, values, operating model and core purposes and practices, in light of developments over the previous decade. Its objective was to determine whether they remained relevant, appropriate, and fit for purpose, and to flag the need for any changes of structure or direction. The review was particularly timely, coming as it did in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic – an event that had presented the SMC with the biggest challenge in its history, and had tested the charity's operation and practices as never before.

Contemporaneously with the strategy review, the SMC engaged an external consultant to help conduct a thoroughgoing assessment of all aspects of the charity's governance. This resulted in the trustees separately approving a number of changes to its constitution, all designed to ensure that the SMC remains a well-governed, fully transparent and compliant organisation, and a responsible and enlightened employer.

Method

The strategy review was led by the Senior Management Team (SMT). It looked at the SMC's structure and operations across the piece. It was conducted over several months, principally through discussions and consultation, including:

- Discussions at the biannual staff awaydays, and on an ongoing ad hoc basis by the SMT
- A half-day session involving the trustees, staff, some other members of the SMC's advisory group, and external speakers at a residential awayday in May 2022
- Discussions at the regular meetings of the trustees
- Consultations with key stakeholders, including funders and influential figures in the worlds of science and the news media
- Discussion at the conference of global SMCs in London in September 2022
- Discussion, and formal approval of the updated strategy, at the meeting of the trustees in October 2022

The review

The SMC is an independent press office for science, health, environment and engineering, which the SMC describes collectively as science. Its core mission has four main strands:

- Improving the public understanding of science
- Improving science reporting (and by extension, the public understanding of science) by encouraging engagement with the media by those scientists with the most relevant expertise
- Working with mainstream news media, and in particular with specialist health, science and environment journalists
- Working with science press officers and other media relations professionals to support and encourage scientists to engage with the mainstream news media

The SMC delivers on these objectives by being:

- Proactive rapid responders
- News-driven, focused mainly on working with the UK's mainstream news media on the biggest stories in science
- Champions of openness and of high quality, accurate science media relations and science reporting
- Participants and opinion formers in debates on issues that have an impact on science in the media
- A convener of voices of science from across the science community
- [Funded by multiple contributors](#), with an upper limit on individual donations as a means of safeguarding editorial independence
- [Governed effectively](#) by a board of trustees, appointed through open recruitment, and advised by an advisory group consisting of the trustees and advisers. The membership of both bodies changes regularly, with appointees serving fixed terms and typically being drawn from stakeholder organisations
- Part of a [network of global SMCs](#)

Values and performance

The strategy review endorsed and reaffirmed the core mission and purpose of the SMC. It further concluded that the values under which the SMC had been operating for the previous twenty years were still relevant and valid. This was a significant vote of confidence in the foundations on which the SMC had been founded and run. The review determined that the SMC's values should therefore continue to be:

- Independent
- Accurate
- Reliable
- Fast
- Evidence-based
- Transparent
- Brave

All those involved in the review agreed that the SMC's response to the unprecedented demands of the Covid-19 pandemic had demonstrated that the organisation was living up to these values in its day-to-day operations, and delivering effectively on its objectives. There was an abundance of external evidence to this effect. Many senior scientists and journalists commented publicly that the SMC had made a major

contribution to the timely and wide-ranging communication of accurate and evidence-based science that the public needed so badly during the crisis.

Defining the SMC's future role

The SMC had therefore embarked on the strategy review from a position of strength. Throughout the process, there was an overwhelming view that wholesale changes or a radical shift in focus were not required. Rather, the importance of the SMC's core purpose and the effectiveness of its working practices had been strongly reinforced by the experiences of the previous ten years, and of the pandemic in particular. Taking this as its key finding, the review then concentrated on seeking ways of building on the SMC's success, and identifying and adapting to changes in the external environment, while remaining faithful to its core purpose.

The review defined the SMC's role for the next period as:

- Maintaining the existing level of focus on four [core services for journalists](#) – roundups on new findings; rapid reactions to breaking news; media enquiries; and press briefings
- Acting as the experts on news for the science community, and the experts on science for the news community
- Being a voice for science in public discourse
- Maintaining editorial independence by retaining the multi-funder model, with donations capped, and with no connection between SMC activities and the specific agendas of any one funding institution
- Taking on only those projects that are commensurate with the SMC's core activities, and for which capacity is, or can readily be made, available
- Remaining small and tightly focused, increasing the headcount only when there is a specific reason to do so

Priorities

Within this framework, the SMC's priorities are to focus on:

- Controversial and contested media stories about science, where there is a danger that science will be misrepresented and that misleading information will reach the public
- Science stories that become headline news and are the subject of general public interest and debate
- Media stories about complex or cutting-edge science that need careful communication and context to ensure measured and accurate reporting
- Media stories on new research findings that might be over-interpreted or hyped
- Media stories on attacks on science or scientists
- Supporting and helping scientists to explain and respond to all such stories
- Encouraging and supporting high standards in science reporting
- Helping journalists to understand where the weight of good-quality evidence lies on contested subjects in science
- Encouraging and supporting high standards and openness in the communication of science by scientists and press officers

Evolving areas

The review acknowledged that the SMC was also evolving in some areas. This includes:

Working with scientists

- Continuing to expand the SMC's database of experts by seeking and encouraging the next generation of senior scientists to engage with the media, and persuading good scientists who avoid the media of the importance of engaging
- Taking a bigger role in supporting scientists who may not have access to institutional press officers or professional communications teams

Working with the media

- Actively monitoring changes in the media landscape and news audience consumption to understand where the public is getting its news about science from, and adapting to changes in provision and consumption accordingly
- Working with news outlets who are attempting to drive more of their journalism onto social media
- Keeping the SMC's own social media policy under constant review, and expanding its activity in this area where the evidence warrants it through partnerships and other means

Working with press officers

- Working more closely with science press officers, not seeking to take over their roles, but providing specific expertise on the news media and handling scientific controversies in the news, and building on the work of the SMC's major 2022 report on [the Changing Role of Science Press Officers](#) (CROSP)

Leadership roles within the community

- Using the SMC's influence and convening power to become a voice of informed opinion on issues around science and the media, barriers to openness in science, and science media relations
- Operating as a press office that upholds standards, not just in news media, but in broader science media relations
- Playing a leadership and convening role in the global network of SMCs – including line management of the Global SMC Coordinator

Building the SMC's supporters

- Reviewing fundraising, with a view to identifying new funding streams and diversifying funding sources

Conclusion

The Board of Trustees of the Science Media Centre endorses the findings and recommendations of this strategy review, and the resultant strategy. The trustees will continue to support the SMT in putting the strategy into practice in the SMC's daily operations, and will hold the chief executive and SMT to account for any shortcomings in this regard. The staff, trustees and advisory group will monitor and review this strategy on an ongoing basis through their regular programme of meetings.