

LGcommunications publications

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# Commission for communications

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# Introduction

## Communicating place matters

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LGcommunications represents local authority communication departments across the UK and Ireland. We exist to promote and extend best practice in public service communications and in doing so improve the reputation of local government.

Public service communications has become increasingly sophisticated and demanding in recent years. The old 'press office' approach has been replaced in many cases by marketing operations seeking to deliver tangible outcomes in terms of increasing understanding of services, involving people with decisions and improving access to services.

The new challenge is place shaping – the call to action in the government, Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper on local government and subsequent legislation. This called for local authorities to provide the “strategic leadership to help bring together various agencies and groups in order to build a vision of how to respond to and address a locality’s problems and challenges in a co-ordinated way”.

This is a challenge where communicators can make a real difference to their authorities. They can craft the strategy, design the messages, oversee the work with partners and track the results.

But to achieve this they need to address the issues set out in this pamphlet. They must place a new emphasis on campaign communications; offer tangible results, agree a common public service approach; generate political leadership and offer a story for their place that is authentic and links legacy issues and future aspiration.

The Place Survey of local authorities this autumn will test how effectively each local authority is delivering and communicating a sense of place. Along with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment it represents a fresh challenge for local government communicators.

I hope that communicators will use this pamphlet to test their own stories for their localities so that next year this pathfinding document can be followed by case studies of place shaping in practice.

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# Executive summary

1. Issues and challenges. Carl Welham, the head of customer service and communication at Buckinghamshire County Council, argues that local government will have to rethink the way that it communicates if authorities are not to see a decline in reputation. The new emphasis on place means that campaigns will have to be assessed according to their impact on the community, not whether council officers are pleased with the posters.

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2. A district perspective on partnership. Partnership working presents communications professionals with a number of challenges but also offers enormous opportunities. Fiona Narburgh, the head of strategy and communications at Wychavon District Council, discusses how her authority rose to the occasion and met community needs by funding its own hospital, helping shape the place and demonstrating the value of local government.

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3. A borough view of branding. Place shaping means that councils have to look at the big picture, says Ian Ratcliffe, the head of marketing and communications at Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council. But this raises questions: what are the implications of branding a place? And does it clash with communicators' responsibility to promote their councils?

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4. Getting the politics right. Communicators often forget the importance of politicians to place shaping campaigns, argues Alex Aiken, the head of communications at Westminster City Council. The views and passionate support of elected leaders can make or break a campaign.

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5. Destination branding. There are many good destinations – places where people want to be – but the real challenge is becoming a great destination, says Michael Hayman, chief executive of The Communication Group. The rules of the game are changing and experience, authenticity and enjoyment are taking the fore.

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6. Storytelling sells the story. Understanding the story of a place is the starting point for articulating its opportunities in the future according to Joe Simpson of the Leadership Centre for Local government. If we are going to bring this story alive for the communities that we serve, we need storytelling to be central to the process. This means bringing communications in at the very start of the process. If we are to really bring this agenda to life, policies should emerge only after we understand the story.

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# Chapter one

## Issues and challenges: brace for impact

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**By Carl Welham,**  
**Head of Customer Service and Communication,**  
**Buckinghamshire County Council**



The advent of the Corporate Area Assessment (CAA) means that we have to rethink the way that we manage local government communications. Rather than focussing on individual council services, our role will be to communicate and indeed shape our communities' sense of place. We will need to move from being channel managers and product, service and policy publicists to becoming champions for our communities. We will have to deliver campaigns that have a measurable impact on our residents.

The recent focus in local government communications, linked to the Local Government Association's Reputation campaign, has seen us pushing out information and waiting for the perception of us to improve. But, as the results of the last three Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) surveys show, satisfaction with local government has actually declined by 11 per cent over the last 6 years. Unless we change the role of communication within our authorities and the way that we operate, the CAA assessment will show a further decline in our reputation.

The BVPI survey results are intriguing. Satisfaction with individual services is up, while satisfaction with councils overall is down. What does that say? People like our services but they don't like us? Possibly. But it's also a reflection of the emphasis that we have placed on communication over recent years.

We have put our efforts into delivering communication products and we reward ourselves for their delivery, not for their effect on the community. Never mind that your campaign to increase voter turnout didn't deliver a single extra person at the polling booths – here's an award because we like your funky posters. We rarely evaluate what we've produced in terms of its impact and we have somehow managed to escape the inspection regime in local government.

This lack of independent scrutiny has made us unaccountable, even to ourselves. We tend to judge the success of our work on whether the person commissioning the work is happy, rather than examining whether we have created real change in the behaviour and attitude of the people we're trying to reach. We rarely research our target audience's preferred means and style of communication.

For example, it's unlikely that anyone under the age of 25 will read anything we print. And yet how many of us are experts in e-communications and interactive media?

Overall – and the satisfaction ratings support this view – we haven't managed to connect with our audience outside the confines of improving communications with our existing customers about our existing products and services. It's a bit like a shop deluding itself that despite the fact that it can't get any new customers, everything's okay because the people who do come in are happy. Meanwhile it's going out of business.

The CAA and our remit to place shape means that we, as local government communicators, will have to adapt or perish. We will finally be judged on the impact of what we do rather than the quality of individual communications products.

To flourish in this new world we will have to become more strategic and influence our leaders to think the same way. Communications based solidly on the results of consultation and market research will be paramount; meanwhile, we will need to wean our authorities away from communications based on internally-generated agendas.

Finally, we will be forced – kicking and screaming, if necessary – into partnership working. Our public will feel better about their communities if they perceive that the public sector is working as one to tackle the issues that are important to them. Individual organisations fighting for attention will have to become a thing of the past and we as communicators will have to manage the internal fallout from this.

All change is both a threat and an opportunity. The threat is that CAA and the focus on the place rather than the provider of local services brings with it a judgement about the true impact of the communications work we are doing. Some of us will find that we haven't been making much impact at all.

But the opportunity CAA and place shaping provides is fantastic. It will allow us to demonstrate the real strategic value of communications and that well-managed, interactive, proactive communication can have a positive effect on the quality of life of those we serve.

# Chapter two

## A district perspective: feeling good about the place and the council

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**By Fiona Narburgh,  
Head of Strategy and Communications,  
Wychavon District Council**



For Wychavon – a low-taxing, high-performing council in the Midlands – communicating what’s great about our place and our council is at the heart of what we do and want to keep on doing.

People say that they love living here, yet we’re a made-up district that you’ll never find on a map. That doesn’t stop residents rating the council amongst the best in the country or our auditors giving us top scores for value for money. We’ve learnt that our job is to do two things well in order to win community trust and respect: firstly, deliver value for money and quality services; and secondly, to work with others to make life even better.

Like all councils we know that this means understanding what makes our communities tick and recognising the issues that matter most, whether that’s health, affordable housing, crime, flooding or migrant workers. As a district council, this means working not simply with the things that we control directly, but with our partners; we are influencers, shapers and persuaders.

So how do we make this work? We have three local strategic partnerships set up, centred on each of the main towns in our district. These partnerships not only improve places but sell their benefits to both residents and visitors. For example, the recently re-opened lido in Droitwich Spa is the only heated inland salt-water lido in the country and an enormous source of town pride. It took seven years to get the funding but with council investment, it is now being run for the community by Wychavon Leisure Limited.

Perhaps the most inspiring example we can offer is that of Pershore Hospital. We intervened in what was the hottest local issue facing the community as Primary Care Trust (PCT) budget cuts threatened local facilities. Rather than deciding that hospitals were within the PCT's remit and were therefore the PCT's problem, we took it on ourselves to build a hospital and a GP's surgery then lease the premises back to the PCT. We invested £6.7 million in the project; the community gets a brand new hospital, the PCT gets a better deal through what we call a "public finance initiative" and we get an income stream. Perhaps we could have decided that hospitals were not our issue, but what is more important than helping people live long and healthy lives?

Getting partnerships right is a delicate, complex process. One of the most important aspects for communications staff to consider is how to balance the council getting credit with our partners' perfectly reasonable expectation of also winning publicity for good work. The first step is to focus on promoting the achievement or benefit rather than the partnership – after all, this is what matters most to residents. Our ultimate aim should be to provide such seamlessly joined-up services that people do not need to know what is provided by us and what by our partners. We want the council and the place to get the kudos.

Finally, one of the most useful things that communications experts can provide is focus and clarity. In these days of place shaping, area assessment, new performance frameworks and White Papers, we need to remember what people expect of their councils: good services for good value – our core brand – and leadership on local issues. This means clear, simple messages promoting our services and things we do to make life better. We need to shape perceptions, encourage people to live healthier lives and get involved in social marketing. And we still need to remember to let people know what services their council tax actually pays for.

# Chapter three

## Issues around communicating and branding place: a borough view

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**By Ian Ratcliffe, executive member of LGcomms and  
Head Of Marketing And Communications at Stockport  
Metropolitan Borough Council**



Current thinking about modern public services and the onset of Comprehensive Area Assessments means that our world will never be the same again. Our role as councils is now about the big picture, about place shaping; alongside this, the role of the modern local government communicator has become that of the strategic adviser.

When it comes to place shaping, single-tier councils have a certain advantage when it comes to branding, simply because there are fewer partners and service deliverers involved in the mix. However, it also raises a number of questions: what are the implications of branding a place? Does it clash with the Local Government Association's Reputation campaign, which encourages us to promote all things council? And is there a toolkit that will help us to navigate around the hazards along the way?

Boroughs need a single, coherent message about what they have to offer. Equally, a local authority should reflect the culture and aspirations of the local communities it serves. Good promotion of both the council and the place's brand might well be challenging, but it is not contradictory.

This is where the value of the strategic communicator comes in. Communications staff should seek similarities and help to shape them into a cohesive entity. However, this approach requires boldness; there are no easy answers. The culture of the brand, be it council or borough, comes from the heart of the place. As communicators we need to express that brand and not be sidetracked by debates about logos.

So how should communicators tackle this? First, work with partners, encouraging and influencing others to make this cohesive branding a reality. As the Lyons report suggests, we should use our creative influencing powers to build and shape local identity.

Once the debate has started, get a bit more radical. Why not get the communications operations across the partnerships to be more place-focussed? With a growing emphasis on cross-cutting services, cross-organisational working and the sharing of services, this is the time to ensure that our structures reflect this. But this is about much more than promotion of a partnership or place. It is about delivering high-quality services across a range of agencies, and branding lies at the heart of that. However, it needs substance based on hard facts, clear vision, achievement and tangible benefits. The way to achieve this is through joint communications and shared projects developed through close work with our partners. Many of us will already have long experience of working on campaigns and initiatives with the full range of health and other partners in the course of our everyday work; this approach points to the future.

Indeed, the future is already here - and it is wider than simply councils. Within the public sector, council communicators are among the very best, so it is up to us now to adopt a leadership role and help to shape coherent messages and communications within each of our areas. There is no one-size-fits all toolkit here. Each borough will require a unique approach, albeit one that is based on common principles.

Any apparent conflict between council and borough branding could be difficult to resolve, but the process itself can be hugely rewarding. We are at a crucial point in the communication of public services. There is a time and above all a place for everything; with the right mixture of strategy and determination we can come into our own by providing real benefits for the places and communities we serve.

# Chapter four

## Getting the politics right

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**By Alex Aiken,  
Head Of Communications,  
Westminster City Council**



Determined political leadership can shape and define place in a way that few other factors can. Politics brings passion and purpose to campaigns around place-shaping; it can help to capture the public imagination. Robust research and an informed political proposition are essential for authentic messages.

Too often politicians are the forgotten element in place shaping. Their view, as elected representatives are smothered by organisational plans, strategies and performance indicators. The mass of words and figures drown-out the messages.

Rudolph Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, is a good example of a political leader who defined his city through the stories he shared. “Whenever I communicated, I explained the overriding philosophy behind what I was saying,” he said later. “My goal was to integrate even the simplest policy decisions into my basic ideas.”

Messages without that passion don’t build a place’s brand; they’re little more than wallpaper for government websites. “Come and visit – there’s something for everyone”, says one well known town in its mission statement. Another famous locality promises to be a “city that has everything!” Of course these bland statements are not the only way that these places try to tell themselves, but they don’t do a lot for me. I also doubt that they support the political goals of the relevant local authorities because I do not believe that they are based in good research, real politics or the passion that these places can generate.

Now consider two statements, the first from a local authority and the second from one of America’s most famous politicians. Here’s the council:

The vision for the borough is of a successful, sustainable and outward-looking local economy, in which businesses, employees, jobseekers and learners receive the help they need to achieve their full economic potential.

Now this:

We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The first tries to give shape to an area's ambitions but succeeds only in defining people as economic objects. The second, part of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, shaped and united an entire nation. That's what good communication and the passion of politics can do when they're combined.

Lincoln wrote and presented his own speech but most communications staff would rather have a much closer connection with their authority's politicians – this ensures that messages are consistent as well as passionate. In some cases this may mean savvy positioning of your arguments so that you are in a position to earn respect for your advice. You need to set out the reputational, financial and recruitment benefits that a clear narrative can deliver to an area.

As a communications professional, your ability to shape the views of politicians and to inspire them depends on two key attributes: your ability to understand their world, which includes both their desire to do good and the fact that they are, prepared to listen to professional advice; and the credibility that you earn through your experience and your use of facts. From there it's a matter of asking the right questions and testing the results. Talk to them about the goal and benefits, not just the process.

Ultimately, one of the main reasons that politics has such an important role in place-shaping campaigns is that it brings passion and focus to the table. As Lord Saatchi writes about the requirements for successful campaigns: "In all forms of competitive human activity, a clear sense of purpose is a prerequisite for success. There must be a noble purpose...there must be a fight against injustice...there must be a sense of direction...and there must be a destination."

A well-prepared communications campaign that sets out the challenge and destination, draws on politicians' strengths as well as thorough research and understanding of the community will inspire people, win advocates and deliver a distinctive message for your community.

# Chapter five

## Destination branding

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by **Michael Hayman**,  
Chief Executive of The Communication Group



Defining a destination is simple: it's a place where people want to be. It could be a shop, a street, a city, a country or a continent, but it is much more than just bricks and mortar. It has an emotional and intangible connection with people, capturing their hearts and minds.

In today's global environment the destination market is becoming increasingly competitive but at the same time there is a trend towards standardisation – many places look, sound and feel the same. Alongside this we are witnessing the rise of cities as the new destination leaders, in particular those that we call capitals of the mind.

There are many good destinations; the real challenge is to become a great destination. Consider the example of London's West End. It's a great destination, but if it is to maintain itself as a flagship for London, communications people need to concentrate on its points of difference and how they can be creatively expressed. It should adopt a capital attitude by defining itself in the minds of its audience and developing a reputation by design rather than default.

The rules of the game are changing. In the past, it might have been good enough to have the biggest, best or tallest, but today it is a more subtle approach based on experience, authenticity and enjoyment that wins. It is as important to the long-term future of the West End to have a reputation for friendliness as it is for great shops. Indeed, the value and success of organisations are driven as much by what they say they do as what they actually do.

At the heart of this change is a new dynamic driver: positioning. Positioning is about delivering a distinctive and authentic experience that underpins reputation. It is what you do to bring places, companies and products to life in the minds of people.

Positioning is at the front line in helping locations around the world become destinations. It is central to harnessing and communicating the authentic legends and stories that attract talent, tourism and trade. The importance of this in helping destinations to stand out, both positively and negatively, can be illustrated by the US town Cedar Bluff. Locals elected to position their town as the “crappy capital of the world” in reference to a fish that lived in surrounding rivers – clearly not the best of choices but it highlights the point.

At The Communication Group, when we are positioning destinations we look at three main things: innovation, perception and stories. Returning to our example of the West End, it is its story that needs the most urgent attention; that’s what it needs to bring to life. People are already overloaded with information, so it’s important to take a less is more approach. The way to appeal future visitors, residents and workers is to share the stories and messages that help the West End to stand apart. As the proverb says: “Tell me a fact and I will learn, tell me a truth and I will believe, but tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever”.

Yet even if the West End – or any place working on destination branding – gets this right, there is no guarantee of success. There is no winning post; no single campaign holds the answer. A constant process of refreshment and renewal is needed. Talent, tourism and trade will become increasingly demanding, and traditionally successful destinations like the West End must work ever harder to stand out.

# Chapter six

## Understanding place: politics, history and storytelling

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**By Joe Simpson, Director Of Partnerships at the Leadership Centre for Local Government**



“Place shaping” is the latest buzz phrase in local government. But if it is to avoid the fate of “community”, which has become something of a blancmange word – a word that people add on to their sentences when they don’t have a clear idea of what they’re trying to say – then we need a clearer understanding of what it means and what we are trying to do. Here are my tips:

1. Place is contested space. This means acknowledging that making decisions is difficult. When the Leadership Centre for Local Government first began working on place shaping I wanted to call the agenda “your place or mine?” In the end I changed my mind, as on the day I was to present our work to ministers at the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister, the press broke the story about the relationship between John Prescott and his secretary. But however impolitic the title may have been, it does encapsulate the challenges that place shaping involves.
2. Place is three dimensional. We have worked closely with Local Futures, a research and strategy consultancy, to develop a simple process to help us to describe place. It involves asking questions that cover three areas: economics, social cohesion and the environment. The first of these means examining the place’s economic activity and the contribution that is being made to wealth creation; cohesion requires us to assess how well the place holds together; and the environment means looking at sustainability and whether or not the place is somewhere that people want to live.

The answers will give you three legs of a triangle; it’s then time to ask yourself what the triangle of your place looks like, and how big it is – in this context, size does matter!

3. Places have histories. When we go for a job we learn the importance of marshalling the facts about our past and using them to demonstrate what transferable skills we will bring to the new job. It's much the same for places: unless we understand a place's history and its current situation, we have no chance of planning its future. Many community strategies could be descriptions of almost any place, anywhere. But for place shaping to be real, we have to identify what is truly unique about a place and what might thus give it a competitive edge. Understanding history is the key to finding this uniqueness.
4. Politics matters. It is through politics that we resolve differences of interest and perspective in society. Place shaping is inherently a political exercise. Additionally, local authorities need to focus more on the place in which they operate and less on pure service delivery. In the words of one assistant chief executive of a northern authority: "for years we have prided ourselves in delivering excellent services to poor people, [but] on balance we think they would prefer not to be poor in the first place."
5. Storytelling sells the story. As I discussed in point 3, understanding the story of a place to date is the starting point for articulating its opportunities in the future. But if we are going to bring this alive for the communities that we serve, we need storytelling to be central to the process. This means that, rather than keeping policy making in its own separate world and bringing communications to "package" the end result, we need to change the flow and bring communications in at the very start of the process. If we are to really bring this agenda to life, policies should emerge only after we understand the story.

# Conclusion

## Making places

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**David Holdstock,  
Chairman, LGcommunications and Head Of  
Communications, London Borough of Hillingdon**



This collection of short essays shows that there is lots of knowledge, but little consensus on making and communicating place. It's a new and interesting challenge for local government and one where we have a leadership role. We have to define what we want for our area.

I was until 2006 Head of Communications for the borough of Slough. This famous town has been defined and damaged by poets, journalists and commentators over the years. I thought then and now that it has a great story to tell – vibrant enterprise and aspirational communities seeking to create prosperity and improve lives. But perhaps if the council in the pre-place shaping days didn't do enough to sell the town, it was because they didn't feel empowered to do so and had too many competing priorities.

In Hillingdon, we are working hard to ensure communicating about our place is at the heart of everything we do. So I think that a great place and inspiring local leadership have to be based on a strong and dynamic proposition, linking past success and future aspiration, realistic and expressed in the language of the town, city or village, not the wordy propositions that too often infect local authorities.

LGcommunications will make the task of understanding how to communicate place a priority in the year ahead because it is one way that effective communications can engage and inspire local people to take pride in their community.



