

Lessons learned in communicating devolution

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In preparing this report we have presented and interpreted information that we believe to be relevant for completing the agreed task in a professional manner. It is important to understand that we have sought to ensure the accuracy of all the information incorporated into this report.

Where we have made assumptions as a part of interpreting the data in this report, we have sought to make those assumptions clear. Similarly, we have sought to make clear where we are expressing our professional opinion rather than reporting findings. Please ensure that you take these assumptions into account when using this report as the basis for any decision-making.

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Context.

There have been various phases of ‘devolution’ within the UK since the Local Government Act of 1888 enabled larger urban authorities to opt out of county government control and gradually a more formalised system of councils was established to deliver public services. Over the last 20 years we have seen a significant shift toward the transfer of power from central government to national, regional and local governments. This started with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolved legislatures, closely followed by the Greater London Authority, and most recently the introduction of wider English devolution deals particularly through the governance mechanism of the ‘combined authority’ (including 8 Mayoral Combined Authorities, and separately Cornwall Council).

As evidenced in research published by Ipsos Mori, the New Local Government Network and PwC in 2015¹, among the general public there is broad support for powers being devolved to local government, though very limited awareness or understanding of what this means in practice. The concept of ‘communicating devolution’ – what it means for local policy makers, for those delivering local public services, for local businesses and for constituents – is relatively new for the UK, though a much more established concept internationally, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlighting comparatively higher levels of fiscal decentralisation across the world.²

A directly elected West Yorkshire mayor was announced in March 2020, the first in two years, with the Government signing a new £1.8bn devolution deal amid plans to ‘level up’ the UK economy. This comes in advance of an expected Devolution White Paper later in 2020 which will provide a framework ‘so that every part of our country has the power to shape its’ own destiny’, as per the Conservative manifesto. With devolution seen as an opportunity to attract inward investment and revitalise local economies, there will be an increased need to illustrate the added value the devolution can bring to a region, and for newly devolved entities this means recognising and leveraging communication as a key function for engaging with their different stakeholder audiences.

With devolution will come a need to communicate on how devolved powers are being used to direct investment, planning and public service delivery; to promote public awareness of the work of devolved institutions (independently of their member local authorities), and specifically the impact and value of devolution. This is often achieved through a combination of internally-focused change and transformation communications, and externally-focussed communication to raise awareness (e.g. of economic development and regeneration), manage reputation and potentially to drive behaviour change among members of the public and businesses.

¹ [Ipsos Mori \(2015\)](#)

² [OECD fiscal decentralisation database](#)

Driven by advances in technology, changes in media consumption patterns and communications preferences, there is now an increasing expectation for a personalised, multi-channel, always-on communications approach.

In a context of further future regional devolution, advances in technology, changes in media consumption patterns and communications preferences, the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned Newgate Research to undertake a focused piece of qualitative research to understand lessons learned in communicating devolution. This research involved a scoping review of relevant literature, interviews with the Head of Communication (or equivalent) in eight combined authorities as well as interviews with four strategic stakeholders with expertise in local government communications. Through this work we have identified the opportunities for communicators working within or for devolved areas, as well as some key principles to consider.

The LGA offers communications support to its member councils, including combined authorities, ranging from bespoke communications reviews and support through to maintaining resource portals such as [Comms Hub](#) and [#FutureComms](#). The LGA also convenes a communications network for combined authority members several times a year, where communications leads meet to discuss challenges, learnings and opportunities for collaboration.

Note that research undertaken to inform this resource was created just before the 2019/2020 COVID-19 outbreak reached the UK. The outbreak and subsequent response has created significant additional challenges to the work of combined authorities and wider devolution work, which are not addressed here. This will be an area for future focus, as the role of devolved areas in managing their response unfolds and the impact that this has on future devolution deals becomes clear.

The remit of communicators in devolved authorities.

Local authorities are established local governance structures with a well-defined remit and operational base, and relatively experienced, multi-disciplinary communications teams. Newly devolved areas are effectively new organisations which creates challenges in terms of developing a shared culture, cohesive teams, policies, processes and protocols.

As has been seen with combined authorities, devolution deals can cut across traditional geographic and economic regions, and across councils under different political leadership. The model of devolution is one which requires constituent members to collaborate and take collective decisions, which has the potential to present challenges on cross-boundary issues like housing. In many devolved areas, an additional factor is the presence of a Metro Mayor – the recognisable face of the devolved authority – with their own political associations which may differ from those of constituent members. The communications team in the devolved authority holds a remit which requires them to navigate this environment and ensure that the priorities of all member authorities are respected and represented externally.

In most of England there are one or two tiers of local government (excluding parish councils) with responsibility for the delivery of public services; devolution allows for the creation of an additional governance structure – a strategic tier of government at a sub-regional level. While evidence suggests that people trust their council (and local councillors) to make decisions about their local area more than parliament³, other research has highlighted how disparate the awareness can be of different types of council, council services and of councillors themselves⁴. In establishing a new form of sub-national governance, a key question and challenge for communicators in devolved areas is how to communicate and demonstrate the added value that devolution brings to constituents within a ‘confusing’ governance landscape, where the ‘council’ is often used as a catch-all term to refer to those responsible for local investment and service delivery.

³ [LGA \(2019\) Polling on resident satisfaction with councils](#)

⁴ [LGA \(2008\) The reputation of local government](#)

The remit of the communications team within the context of a devolved area is a considerably different challenge to that of a similar team in a local authority. Priorities are shaped by the focus of the strategic plan (or equivalent) and the Mayoral agenda - both of which are targeted but necessarily reactive to capitalise on opportunities for regional growth.

Often with a smaller team, there are a highly fluid set of issues to communicate on, and diverse stakeholder audiences ranging from constituents, local businesses and LEPs to council leaders and central government stakeholders to international visitors and investors. Communicators in devolved authorities therefore need to be adept at working across the full communications spectrum (public relations, marketing, social media, website management, public and stakeholder engagement) and with partners from both the public and private sector.

Through discussions with Heads of Communication (or equivalent) in eight of the existing combined authorities, as well as interviews with strategic stakeholders drawing on years of local government communications expertise, this research has identified a number of opportunities for communicating devolution which are covered in the remainder of this report. These include:

1. A commitment to partnership working
2. Recognising the value of strategic communications
3. Establishing and leveraging a shared identity
4. Keeping communications relevant and relatable
5. Leveraging the Mayoral profile
6. Active dialogue with the public and businesses
7. Think strategically and plan ahead

Communications opportunities in devolved authorities.

A commitment to partnership working.

Key to the effective functioning of devolved areas is balancing (potentially) competing local priorities to develop and maintain strong relationships between the senior leadership, councillors, and council staff. A clear and unwavering commitment to work together at all levels is needed for communications staff to have the ability to communicate on devolution issues with one clear and impactful voice.

A good example of this is Greater Manchester, where there are strong relationships between the Mayor's office and each of the ten Greater Manchester councils which make up the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. This has been fostered through many years of joint working following the establishment of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities in 1986 as a voluntary collaboration that helped to shape policy and governance across the metropolitan area. A wide range of similar examples exist elsewhere in the world such as shared regional planning between the city-state of Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg in Germany, or within Oregon, USA through a Metro Council aiming to advance regional planning goals.

"If we are the sum of our parts, we are a stronger whole."

From a communications standpoint, devolution presents a very clear remit around advocating, promoting and seeking investment on behalf of the devolved area. The Mayor (or equivalent leader) is the directly elected voice of residents and councils who all work together to achieve common goals. Using unifying language like 'more money' and 'fair share' in public-facing communications helps indicate that the devolved authority is working on behalf of the wider region.

Communications teams shouldn't underestimate how much time and effort is required to navigate local, regional and national politics. Having staff within the communications team that come with public affairs and political management experience is helpful, as is investing in supporting policy leads within the devolved authority to manage stakeholder relations. This requires constant attention, with tailored approaches for each individual project that the devolved authority leads on.

Teams should invest time in supporting the profile and activity of local councillors from across member authorities. This includes publicising the decision-making process within devolved areas and, in the case of mayoral combined authorities, illustrating the role that cabinet members play in this in conjunction with the Mayor. Examples of other ways in which the communications team can help to build positive relationships between local stakeholders include: making space for them to appear on the social media channels of the combined authority, engaging local democracy reporters to cover cabinet members on issues relevant to the devolved authority, and helping cabinet members with public speaking engagements (e.g. through supporting them with speaker notes to present cabinet papers).

It is also critical to develop strong relationships and partnership working arrangements with communications (and customer service) counterparts in constituent member local authorities early. Meetings should be held regularly to ensure everyone understands what the purpose of the devolved authority is (and communications within this). This won't always be easy, but it is important to keep offering opportunities to talk, to find common ground and to try to keep separate from the local politics. Building a strong partnership – by recognising and supporting the priorities of different authorities - helps to develop a shared belief and commitment to partnerships, and to minimise reputation management issues. Communications practitioners can then build on this to foster a shared identity that sparks passion, interest and engagement about the devolved authority and the Mayor, and how this can support everyone in achieving their goals.

“You need to invest the time to build relationships with cabinet members, councillors, policy and communications. Building trust and mutual understanding doesn't happen overnight.”

Recognising the value of strategic communications.

Devolution communications is challenging for many reasons, not least because the form it takes in any given area will differ at different times, making it difficult to pin down. Knowing what success looks like and being able to shape and to deliver against the strategy to achieve success is crucial for communicators tasked with engaging potentially disparate stakeholder audiences.

Communications is critical in ensuring effective stakeholder engagement and management, and the most effective communications are strategically planned and delivered, with clear measurable objectives and intended outcomes, and rigorous evaluation. Direct lines of communication between the Head of Communications and the Chief Executive and/or Senior Management Team (SMT) are key in ensuring issues on the horizon can be foreseen and prepared for. In some cases this has been achieved through a governance structure that includes Communications within the SMT, while in others it is achieved through more formalised briefing processes and procedures.

“If you want to build trust the Head of Communications needs to be at the top table.”

The communications team will be most effective in delivering on the priorities of the devolved authority where it is valued as a strategic function, with direct access to senior management and the decision-making process, and resourced to deliver against the desired remit. Where communication is seen as something tactical and operational that happens at the end of a process – a press release - it severely limits the opportunity for communicators to plan strategically and help senior leaders to maximise the effectiveness of their messaging.

Establishing and leveraging a shared identity.

To make people feel good about something, it is important to understand what forms the identity of an area/ place. In the context of a devolved area, you need to understand what brings people within the area together and what binds them as a collective under a shared identity relating to place. If people feel part of the same 'club' there is a shared feeling of identity.

For example, in the West Midlands, places like Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country are very different areas, each with strong individual identities. But there is also a shared regional identity of being from the West Midlands, an identity grounded in the creation of the county over 25 years ago and bolstered through strategic communications uniting regional transport services under a common 'West Midlands' brand identity. Metro Mayor Andy Street commented at the launch of West Midlands Transport: *'This is our chance to inspire a similar sense of pride and identity for people in our region and the transport links that connect their lives.'*

Similarly, when the Tees Valley Combined Authority was created in 2016 it took on the remit of regional culture and tourism, with ambitions to attract 20 million visitors journeys to the region. The Tees Valley hadn't had a regional tourism brand for nearly seven years before launching 'Enjoy Tees Valley' as a destination and marketing organisation, with a website, tourism service and brand. Campaign activation included the creation of large letters spelling ENJOY (in the style of the famous 'Hollywood' sign) which toured the region, gaining significant media and social media coverage and boosting awareness of a common identity as part of the launch and subsequent communications and marketing activations which also generated and augmented support from local authorities and private businesses.

To deliver effective citizen-focused communications in newly devolved areas it is critical to develop a deep understanding of the different identities that already exist. Where there is an existing shared identity (such as the Tees Valley or the West Midlands) then the communications team and leading figures like the Mayor should emphasise this. An example of successfully communicating the shared identity of the area is exemplified by the Mayor of Tees Valley, who doesn't speak of a particular borough, but speaks of the five boroughs as one region: Tees Valley or, often for a more local audience, "Teesside, Darlington and Harlepool". Where there is no existing shared identity, the communications team will need to foster a place-based identity that people from each of the member local authorities can relate to.

One example of this may be rallying around issues which impact different communities within the devolved authority, such as flooding, and ensuring that different members are engaging on shared social media channels. The LGA [has guidance on creating a place brand](#) that can be used to tell the story of your place.

Fostering a shared identity isn't just important externally, but is also fundamental to the efficient functioning of a devolved authority. A significant body of research already exists highlighting the importance of shared identity on communications, teamwork and performance⁵. The challenge for newly devolved authorities is that they are often formed, relatively quickly, through combining staff from a range of different organisations, each with their own existing sets of practices, values and identities.

Aligning staff around a common identity relating to the work and aims of the devolved authority is something that can easily be overlooked, with an expectation that this will arise simply through joint-working. While collaboration will help people feel part of the same organisation, this can be expedited and made more efficient through staff buying in to a common vision and mission as early as possible in the authorities lifecycle. The communications team have an important role to play in fostering this identity through ensuring internal communications (messaging, branding, newsletters, on-boarding information etc.) consistently develop and reinforce this shared identity. Staff are the key advocates for a devolved authority. Having everyone pull together under a common banner will help in then presenting a unified front externally.

Keeping communications relevant and relatable.

A lot of activity being undertaken within a newly devolved area is strategic and high level – it relates to pilot projects, feasibility studies, partnerships, and setting the infrastructure for future growth. Lessons from combined authorities suggest that most residents care little about civil governance structures, and more about the performance of services that impact on their daily lives, or flagship projects which impact on their sense of belonging and pride in an area. Focusing on these aspects helps to convey how devolution has added value to a region.

Businesses meanwhile require a clearer focus on the role of the devolved areas in attracting investment (through creating an environment that is attractive for businesses – in terms of skills, transport and infrastructure) and developing an international profile. As part of their communications toolkit, Cornwall Council created a plain English guide to the Cornwall devolution detailing exactly what devolution meant for specific devolved areas such as business support and rates, health and social care, and transport⁶.

⁵ For example see [Greenaway K., et al \(2014\) Shared Identity is Key to Effective Communication](#) and [Mesmer-Magnus J., et al. \(2018\) How Organizational Identity Affects Team Functioning: The Identity Instrumentality Hypothesis](#)

⁶ [Cornwall Devolution Deal. What does it mean?](#)

A tangible example of success in keeping communications relevant and relatable comes from the Tees Valley Combined Authority where, through collaboration amongst partner authorities, the Mayor was able to bring Teesside International Airport back into public ownership. The airport deal – a promise made in the Mayoral campaign – included 817 acres of land and presented significant development opportunities to drive inward investment and the creation of new jobs. This presented a significant opportunity to communicate and illustrate the value that the Mayor and the combined authority brought to the Tees Valley. The 2022 Commonwealth Games is another example, where each member of the West Midlands Combined Authority has collaborated in setting the foundations for promoting a high profile event that benefits each authority.

Another mechanism for achieving cut through with audiences is to provide a human-interest angle, for example through case studies and personal experiences conveying the benefits of a scheme that the devolved authority has had responsibility for delivering. Traditional, print media tends to cover local authority areas and so stories have to be shaped and made local to be most relevant and relatable.

Leveraging the Mayoral profile.

Communications teams will face an uphill battle in building another tier or structure of government in people’s minds. Instead, the opportunity for newly devolved areas is to centre communications around a key spokesperson or figurehead such as the Mayor and to rally partners across the private and public sector to work in collaboration for the benefit of both their interests and that of the whole devolved region.

Many communications teams in established combined authorities don’t push awareness of what the combined authority does; instead the Mayor is used as a proxy for the combined authority. The Mayor is a key figurehead for devolved authorities and can have a significant profile at both the regional and national level. As such they have a key role to play in facilitating successful communications through leveraging the attention that can be gained from local and regional media. Similarly, the Mayor’s social media account typically has a higher following than that of the devolved authority.

To maximise reach, the communications team can ensure that there is duplication of content across both the Mayor’s personal channels and those of the devolved authority, helping raise the profile of the devolved authority through the medium of the Mayor. There should also be recognition that Mayors have been successful in utilising their own profile and platform to act as ambassadors for initiatives that serve to support the region on both a national and international stage. As an example, the recent Institute for Government report on devolution highlights how the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has been a ‘cheerleader for a form of gorgeous mosaic’, pro-development, city policy⁷.

⁷ [Insitute for Government \(2019\) Has devolution worked?](#)

Active dialogue with the public and businesses.

Businesses have long been actively engaged in strategic planning decisions at a local and regional level, most recently through Local Enterprise Partnerships, which also form a key stakeholder in combined authority membership structures. A key trend over the past 10-15 years has been an increasing recognition of the importance of actively consulting and engaging with the public around decisions on policies and services that will impact them. This helps to not only ensure that they feel heard but that their expectations and needs are accounted for in design, delivery and communication.

At a local authority level, recent examples have included a multiplicity of citizens assemblies and juries on climate change. Where such public dialogue is done well – as has been the case in participatory planning activities in Barcelona ranging from roaming face-to-face on-street engagement⁸ through to participatory online platforms such as Decidim.org⁹; and in the San Francisco Transbay Redevelopment Project¹⁰ – it can provide a powerful vehicle for public involvement in decision making. Similar examples exist in relation to businesses, albeit using different structures (such as the [Committee for Sydney](#) or the more traditional [London Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#)). There are a wide range of digital platforms that now exist to support participatory planning, budgeting and consultations, as well as many experienced practitioners in public dialogue and citizens juries.

Devolved authorities would do well to leverage these tools and skills in maximising the opportunities for both the Mayor and authority staff to actively engage citizens in two-way dialogue. As highlighted by the Institute for Government¹¹, examples of this within combined authorities are relatively nascent and have tended to focus on specific subgroups. For instance, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands have both established ‘youth combined authorities’ – which serve both as a governance opportunity and development programme for those young people participating. The North of Tyne Authority, like both London and a number of other combined authorities, have successfully employed Mayor’s Question Time events to support opportunities for dialogue. Expanding on this, standardising and formalising an approach to ongoing public dialogue that are directly related to the planning and strategy process could be an inspired step for future combined authorities.

⁸ [De la Pena \(2018\) Design as Democracy](#)

⁹ [European Commission \(2018\) Future of Cities](#)

¹⁰ [Transbay Citizen Advisory Committee \(2017-2019\)](#)

¹¹ [Insitute for Government \(2019\) Has devolution worked?](#)

Think strategically and plan ahead.

The communications team in a devolved authority has a hugely varied remit, both internally and externally due to the fluid nature of devolution. Newly devolved authorities will likely be inheriting a range of staff, including within the communications team. One of the first actions for the Head of Communications is to undertake some form of audit to identify what skills are available in the team and to map these against current and future need. The current trend is for a multi-disciplinary team (though with delineated lead responsibilities), rather than a team of specialists, enabling greater resilience and flexibility to account for the changing demands and budgets available for communications.

Examples of the kind of skills that may be required include:

- Marketing and creative skills. These are important initially as a range of work needs to take place in relation to corporate (re)branding around values and behaviours, and the associated corporate documents such as the staff induction pack, recruitment materials, brand guidelines, logos etc. Video content is also great for repurposing for repeated use in different circumstances. For example, when launching an environmental manifesto you might create a video summarising the key points with vox-pops from relevant stakeholder audiences. These can be shown on roadshows, party conferences, social media channels and internally on screens within the organisation.
- Public engagement. With changes in the nature of public expectations around accountability and involvement in decision making, the channels and skills required to engage with members of the public effectively are increasingly important. This includes understanding the opportunities presented by citizens juries, public dialogue and democratic structures for specific groups.
- Digital capabilities. The remit and priorities for the authority will change rapidly over time so it is important to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in the digital channels (the website and social media accounts) used to accommodate this, and that search engine optimisation is set-up to increase the visibility of channels on topics relevant to devolved priorities.
- Crisis management. With a wider and more reactive remit, it is important that communications professionals in devolved authorities have the capacity and capability to manage a 24/7 response.

The communications team needs to be clear about organisational objectives, how these translate into communications objectives, and the audiences to reach in order to achieve those objectives. Evidence-based segmentations can help teams to target different people through different channels. This includes the effective use of digital channels - Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn - which enable targeting via paid for advertising and are likely to become increasingly important in the future. Having clarity on objectives also enables teams to evaluate the relative effectiveness of different campaign tactics, providing evidence on return on investment.

“Sending out a press release to all and sundry doesn’t work, you must target your audiences from the start, you’ve got to choose your communications and communicate at the right time.”

Summary and implications.

In the context of further future regional devolution enabling newly established authorities to generate investment and opportunities at a regional level, communications and engagement has a key supporting role to play at a local, national and international level. While there will be challenges - notably relating to the resources, remits and operations of teams in newly established organisations - these can be overcome through a commitment to collaboration and working toward a shared vision and mutually beneficial outcomes.

Through conversations with stakeholders, there were a number of areas of opportunity identified, with examples of 'bright spots': those actions and activities which have proven to be successful for organisations at different stages of their devolution journey. These included:

- 1. A commitment to partnership working.** Ensuring that both senior leadership and communications teams invest time and resource in developing strong relationships and partnership working arrangements with councillors and council staff (including communications counterparts in constituent member authorities). This includes recognising and supporting the priorities of these different authorities and stakeholders where these align with the aims of the devolved area. Greater Manchester was cited as a good example of partnership working, with relationships fostered with concerted efforts between authorities across the region.
- 2. Recognising the value of strategic communications.** The most effective communications are strategically planned and delivered, aligned in timing and tone with clear organisational goals. Direct lines of communication between the Head of Communications and the Chief Executive and/or Senior Management Team (SMT) are key in ensuring issues on the horizon can be foreseen and prepared for. Tactical communications will only get an organisation so far.
- 3. Establishing and leveraging a shared identity.** To deliver effective citizen-focused communications in newly devolved areas it is critical to understand the different identities that already exist and, where necessary, to build a shared identity that binds people within a region. An example of this is the use of unifying language and branding in communications, such as the 'Enjoy Tees Valley' Hollywood-sign campaign supported by the Tees Valley Mayor and his identifying with 'the Tees Valley' rather than any individual area. Similar emphasis is needed on internal communications to ensure that the primary advocates for the devolved authority – an authority's staff – are also aligned under one identity and one banner.

4. **Keeping communications relevant and relatable.** Lessons from combined authorities suggest that most of the citizens care little about civil governance structures, and more about the performance of services that impact on their daily lives, or flagship projects which impact on their sense of belonging and pride in an area. Focusing on these aspects helps to convey how devolution has added value to a region.
5. **Leveraging the Mayoral profile.** Devolved authorities can benefit from having a key spokesperson or figurehead such as the Mayor who can act as a proxy for the wider authority, using their public profile and personal communication channels to enhance coverage of authority-wide causes. The Mayor of London is one such example of a figurehead who has managed this effectively for the benefit of the city as a whole.
6. **Active dialogue with the public and businesses.** A key trend in recent years has been the increase in active, two-way dialogue with members of the public around policy decisions. This could be through traditional citizens juries through to innovative online and offline activity such as that used in Barcelona's municipal planning. This builds on existing structures for business engagement and helps ensure that people feel heard and that their priorities are accounted for in the design, delivery and communication of services and policies.
7. **Think strategically and plan ahead.** The remit of the communications team in a devolved authority is wide-ranging, changeable and significantly different from that of a traditional local authority. Ensuring that the communications team is able to draw on multi-disciplinary expertise (including creative and digital skills, public engagement and crisis management) can help promote greater resilience and flexibility to meet the needs placed on communications professionals within a devolved authority.

As the national membership body for local authorities the LGA has developed a range of resources to support existing and newly devolved authorities, including communications-specific case studies and guidance to help members to communicate devolution, as well as practical support including communications reviews. More information on the LGA's communications support and improvement offer can be found on the [LGA website](#).

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