The Future of External Channels
White Paper

Contents

Introduction

The Future of External channels is a daunting topic to take on. But take on we have – and with gusto. We've sought to explore the bread and butter – or 'go-to' – marcomms activities that make up the majority of the public sector communications toolbox. Whether this be a drive for social media excellence or more targeted e-marketing, not forgetting media relations.

We've looked at some of the techniques that might be called 'best practice' and brought them to life through useful and practical case studies. Equally, we've been re-appraising some of our more traditional channels.

No, we're not campaigning to bring back Betamax or Mini-Disc. But rather, we are looking at how comms teams are re-mastering channels that came back to prominence during the pandemic – such as paid-for advertising as well as traditional publications and direct mail.

We've also gazed into our crystal ball – or more likely put our virtual reality goggles on and gone for a time travelling adventure! Although what we've also seen is that this future is a reality now. With some great examples of augmented and virtual reality being used effectively across the public and private sector – for some really strong, targeted advocacy or to engage more effectively different types of audiences.

And finally, we have deliberately not listed out specific channels and then pitted them against each other. But rather, in the final section we continue to champion the need for an integrated mix of activities, focussed on outcomes and within an overall campaign strategy. We hope this is a useful guide for newer practitioners and experienced managers alike.

Chapter 1: Current 'Go-to' channels

What are the current mainstay tools for public sector communicators that have worked effectively for the past five years and during the pandemic?

Despite an ever-expanding range of tools and techniques at our disposal, certain 'go-to' channels have tended to dominate in recent years when it comes to public sector communications.

In this chapter, we explore how those core channels are being used, and evolving, to deliver the most recognisable elements of public sector communications.

Social media

The advantages of social media to public sector communicators remain obvious. It is a simple and low-cost way of communicating with large audiences quickly and easily. Key updates and announcements can be shared within minutes and campaigns can generate considerable reach and engagement with little or no spend. The pandemic also underlined the advantage of being able to disseminate information at speed and adapt messaging regularly to reflect changes in government guidance or respond to specific local contexts.

But the sheer volume of content on social media and changes in algorithms which prioritise advertising mean organic content is often being 'squeezed' out of people's feeds. Overcoming this challenge requires content that is timely, relevant and engaging for target audiences. A 'video first' approach to content creation also holds the key here - the launch of Instagram Reels and their incorporation into Facebook feeds, a move mirrored by Twitter's new auto-scroll feature for video content, reflect a clear direction of travel as the key players in social media seek to compete with TikTok and prioritise short-form video content.

While the perception that only 'young people' use social media is perhaps misguided, there are clear patterns in terms of the demographic make-up of different channels and the content that performs best - a broadcast, one-size-fits all approach to social media is unlikely to deliver effective results. This underlines the need for clarity in terms of objectives and audience. 'Who do I want to reach and where I will find them?' remains the all-important question for our approach to social media - answering it requires a more sophisticated understanding of major social media platforms and how they are used by target audiences, highlighting the benefits of channel insight research.

The pandemic also saw considerable growth of community-focused Facebook groups and street/road WhatsApp chats, as people sought to stay connected with their friends and neighbours during lockdown. Local authorities such as Essex and Hertfordshire were able to tap into these channels through Community Champion initiatives - distributing public health information via a network of local residents - but the benefits of localised social media go beyond the pandemic. These community-led social networks, as well as other hyper-local channels such as Nextdoor, can help public sector communicators target their social media content more effectively to reach key audiences.

Richmond Council: Creating a content strategy that cuts through

The challenge: *A real challenge faced by any communications team, public sector or otherwise, is establishing a content strategy to help reach the right audience, on the right channel, with the right message, at the right time - the holy grail! The Richmond Communications Team knew that a robust strategy could also be used to influence requests for communications activity that lacked a clear call to action or strategic purpose.*

What they did: *The team wanted to move away from purely broadcasting to their audiences on social media and instead sought to meaningfully engage audiences. Communications should have a clear narrative that supports at least one key council priority. They also wanted to look for opportunities to pool budgets from different teams where they could. For example, an active travel campaign can get cars off the road, which improves air quality and helps the Council's climate change agenda, but also gets people moving more, which is good for Public Health.*

The result: *A framework with defined questions that need to be answered robustly before work takes place.*

- *Setting clearly defined objectives*
- *Identifying the key audiences and how they will benefit*
- *Laying out how the content is differentiated from other / similar campaigns or work*
- *Defining the different types of content that will achieve these objectives*
- *Designing an implementation plan, including timing and evaluation.*

To achieve this, the team used the campaigns feature on their SoCrowd platform. This helped to:

- *Pinpoint what types of content performs best on each channel*
- *Identify areas of overlap as content can be tagged with two or more campaigns*
- *Identify the best time for posting for different topics*
- *Discover most engaged followers on each topic*

Through having a well-defined content strategy, the team can now make the right tactical decisions for their business-as-usual and campaign content. This has been recently implemented and already they've seen anecdotal improvements in the quality and engagement of their posts. It has also had the added benefit of taking the stress out of digital forward-planning for the team.
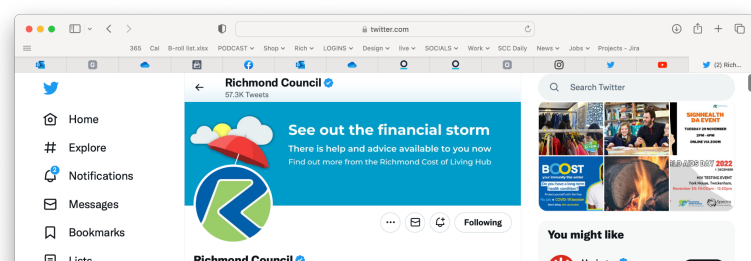
Direct mail and e-marketing

In situations where social media is too broad in its reach to be effective, direct mail is the obvious go-to alternative, whether through email or traditional postal mail-outs.

E-newsletters can allow for a greater degree of audience segmentation and increase the impact of calls-to-action with direct links through to relevant web pages. They also offer opportunities for more detailed evaluation of communications impact via open rates and click-through rates. At the same time, they are dependent on having access to a large bank of email addresses and - like social media - public sector communicators are competing with other organisations and companies for people's attention. As inboxes become oversaturated with e-newsletters and marketing emails, ensuring content is timely and relevant to key audiences is crucial for retaining high engagement.

While direct mail-outs via post have a greater cost implication, they can offer similar advantages to e-shots, and postal addresses can be easier to access than emails for some public sector organisations. Making the most of scheduled mail-outs (e.g. additional inserts into Council Tax letters) can provide a welcome boost to priority campaigns while minimising additional costs. The impact of physical mail-outs can also be effectively evaluated through specific QR codes or tracking other metrics against delivery dates.

Public sector communicators must be wary of losing audiences that are harder to reach or less likely to engage with postal mail-outs - young people and BAME residents are more likely to rent privately and change addresses more frequently, making it harder to access up-to-date contact information.

e-shot Partnership

A joint partnership between LGcomms and e-shot will see the launch of a brand new resource library of email designs based on national campaign toolkits. Email is often overlooked in national campaigns and yet it is consistently shown to be the most popular and effective digital channel to reach key audiences.

The easy to use templates will save time and money spent on designing, and include campaigns such as Help for Households and Winter Vaccinations. This means that the brand isn't compromised and brand recognition continues to grow. The resource library will be continually added to as new campaigns are launched.

All designs will be responsive and accessible, and available in formats compatible with any email system. Members already using e-shot will also be able to use the new designs as templates to adapt.

LGcomms and e-shot are partnering up to deliver this new resource to public sector professionals. To view the library please visit https://e-shot.net/email-library

Traditional press

Another of the core capabilities of any communications team is dealing with the press, at any time being ready to react to journalists enquiring about anything from dead pigeons or rutting stags to multi-million pound infrastructure projects of national significance. It is also the area of communications that can be most daunting, especially for those picking up the phone to a journo for the first time.

If approached in the right way, both proactive and reactive media handling can be a huge opportunity with a scale of audience that could not be achieved in any other way, for no cost. It's important to understand that journalists are not the enemy. They can be a valuable mouthpiece and are often just eager to know more (caveat: there are exceptions to this rule, and are usually easy to spot). Local, regional and national press can often be the quickest way to reach a mass audience, as demonstrated many times during the pandemic when warning and informing communities what was required, whether that was surge testing operations or fast-changing local restrictions.

A more recent development in media handling, certainly for local authorities, is the Local Democracy Reporter scheme established by the BBC, funding local journalists to scrutinise public services and sharing copy across local media. The experience has been varied, and challenging for many authorities, with some high profile difficulties demonstrating how tricky this landscape can be for communications teams to manage. However, when the relationship is cultivated and built up on a human level, it can help contextualise a lot of the challenges local authorities can sometimes get tripped up on, such as [Surrey's work around children in care](#). While there is always an element of risk that must be considered, sometimes an open and honest in-depth conversation with a senior leader or politician can go a long way in building trust and understanding, not just with the journalist but also their readers.

Of course, local media can be an advertising avenue too and it's important to understand readership figures and likely reach for any press ad spend, whether that's online or in the newspaper. It might also help develop a targeted media strategy understanding how your audiences are consuming their local news and where to focus energy.

Websites

Websites remain a vital and often undervalued tool for public sector communicators. They are used frequently, Lewisham Council's website averages over one million page views a month. Websites tend to be perceived as trusted sources of information by the general public, a significant advantage in an age of increased disinformation and misinformation online. If kept up to date and designed with SEO techniques in mind, they can ensure audiences are able to access accurate information and help support wider communications objectives.

While websites tend to operate as 'passive' communications tools, providing information that audiences are already seeking, they can offer opportunities for 'active' communication too. Key campaign messages can be incorporated into web copy, home pages can be designed to prioritise specific calls-to-action or relevant news stories, pop-ups can be used to encourage e-newsletter sign-ups and analytic tools can collect useful data to inform other campaigns and strategies.

A well-designed and effectively-used website can be an extremely useful tool for public sector communicators. Gov.uk for example is an excellent example of an easy to use, concise website that has hundreds of thousands of bits of information on it, distilled into a clear sequence and search functions.
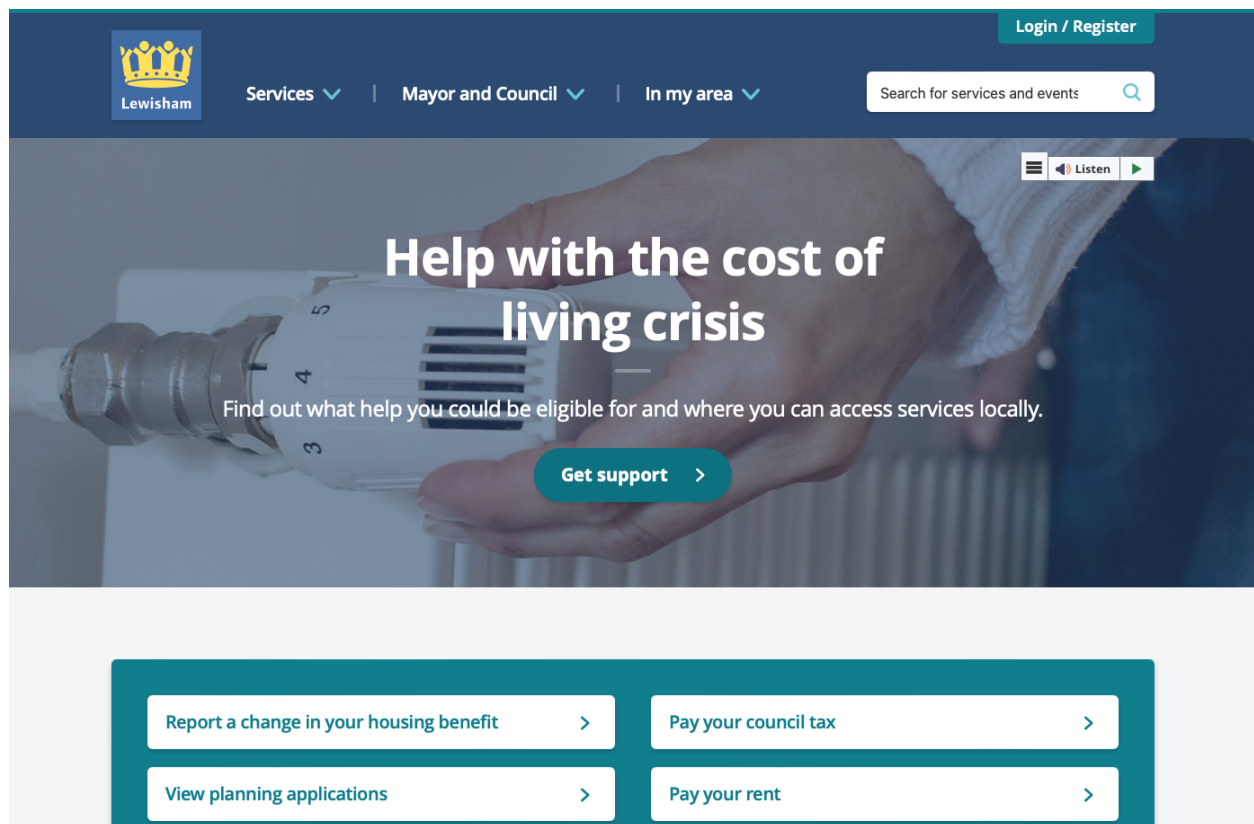
Chapter 2: What channels are now being digitally re-mastered and making a comeback?

Digital innovation over the past few decades has provided a host of new tools in the arsenal of public sector communicators, from the rapid growth of social media to the expansion of programmatic advertising and everything in between. The landscape is changing, which is welcome news for many. With council budgets under increasing pressure every year, many communications teams will naturally be drawn to the emerging channels promising to widen their reach into local communities for little or no cost.

The question is, where does this leave the old-school vinyl of communications? In a world where you can ask your smart speaker what day the bins are collected, it begs the question, will traditional channels such as direct mail, printed publications and paid-for advertising stand the test of time?

This chapter will show that the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, digital remastering has given traditional channels the opportunity to evolve and adapt to the modern world.

In with the old?

To start, it is worth exploring whether 'old-school' tactics ever went away. The experience of many councils in the room at the LGcomms Future of External Communications Channels roundtable event in 2022 is that at a minimum, people still expect their council's website to be updated and to be able to call or speak to someone if they have an urgent problem. In one north-west London borough, the council magazine is still the top source of all news and information for local residents.

The fact is, not everyone in the world has caught up with the rapidly changing digital landscape. There are still those without a phone, a computer or a TV who rely on traditional communication channels to get the information they need. According to the latest data available from the Office for National Statistics, while almost all adults aged 16 to 44 in the UK were recent internet users in 2020 (99%), this number is almost halved when compared to adults aged 75 years and over (54%). While this number is diminishing every year, the minority who may still be digitally excluded cannot be ignored. In many cases, this may even be the target audience. This is one of the reasons that traditional tactics are still so important. However, that's not to say established and new channels cannot work together, as many councils proved during the pandemic.

Staffordshire & JCDecaux: A two-screen strategy

The challenge: The 'Survive' service was launched by Staffordshire Women's Aid and the Staffordshire Commissioner for survivors of sexual assault and abuse in Staffordshire. It was crucial to raise awareness of the new service as widely as possible to reach the greatest number of those in need of it and go beyond those already known to Staffordshire Women's Aid. Above all, it was essential to ensure victims knew when and where to access support and the types of support available.

What they did: Staffordshire Women's Aid worked with JCDecaux UK and JCDecaux partner Crossover to run a twelve-month integrated 'two screen' campaign where classic and digital 'public screen' out-of-home media worked in partnership with 'private screen' mobile, online and digital channel communications across Staffordshire.

Data-driven planning featuring the same creatives, ensured that both 'real world' and online channels worked in partnership.

To launch, out-of-home media in specific high-footfall locations, including supermarkets and rail stations, were used to raise blanket awareness of the 'Survive' service. Staffordshire Women's Aid then leveraged that momentum to tailor the message and channels used, allowing them to reach target groups who they knew found it more difficult to report sexual assault and abuse - young people; LGBT communities; BAME communities; those with learning difficulties; and older women.

As these target groups had initially been reached by the 'public screen' launch message, they were already familiar with it and primed to act when they subsequently saw the message online. The 'private screen' online campaign featured bespoke combinations of mobile in-app messaging, Facebook/Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, depending on each target audience.

The result: "We were really pleased with the long-term, integrated campaign. It delivered impressive levels of direct engagement, with more than 14,000 clicks through to Survive resources, and referrals to the service increasing during the campaign." Charlotte Almond, Strategy & Business Development Manager, Staffordshire Women's Aid.

Communicating in a crisis

During the pandemic, all councils faced the challenge of finding the quickest and easiest ways to share essential public health information, especially with hard-to-reach communities. This is where those traditional channels, like leaflet drops, phone calls and good old face-to-face community engagement were worth their weight in gold. However, with digital remastering, councils could double their impact. With digital advertising boards, SMS messages to complement direct mail and WhatsApp groups, key messages could be spread further and faster.

Word of mouth was a tool no council could ignore during the pandemic. People were asking their friends, family members, neighbours and faith leaders for reliable information rather than listening to official sources. This paved the way for a channel shift. If people won't listen to us, how can we get information to the people they will listen to? From this came community champion networks that put trusted voices front and centre. People who could convey information in different languages and formats local people would understand.
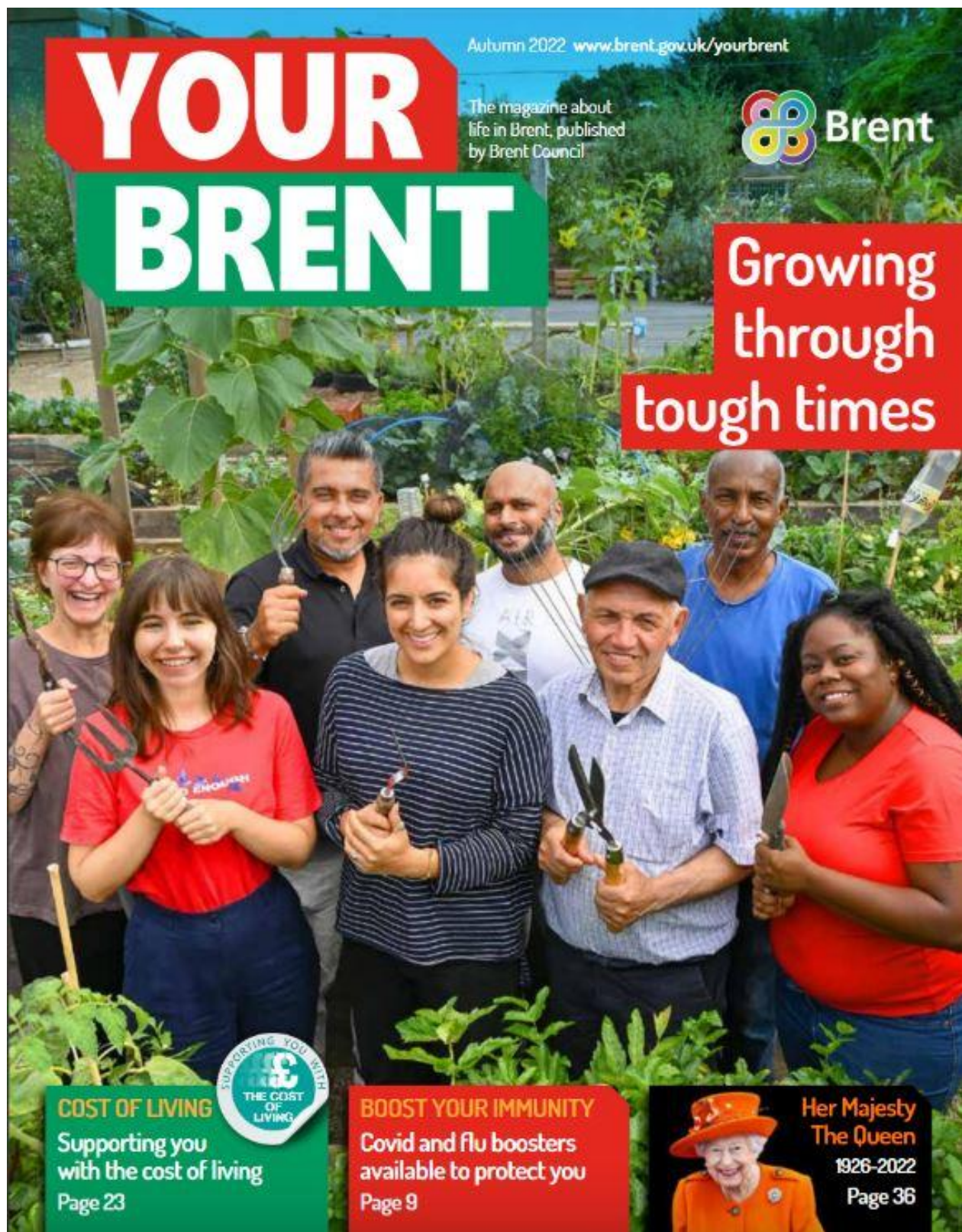
While this is a more traditional way of sharing information, councils like Lewisham used platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups and Nextdoor to get information to community champions. These people then used it to pass it on through their networks. These are examples of old meeting new, traditional channels incorporating digital aspects to deliver a better outcome.

'The Vax' webinars: Brent Council tackling vaccine hesitancy

The challenge: 'The Vax' webinar series organised by Brent Council in 2021 aimed to tackle vaccine hesitancy in communities with the lowest uptake by putting trusted voices front and centre. At the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, parts of Brent were recorded as having the highest death rates from Covid-19 in the UK. However, the borough also initially had one of the lowest rates of vaccine uptake, especially within Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. The council prioritised addressing misinformation around the vaccine and specific communities' concerns.

What they did: Brent organised a series of virtual webinars hosted by trusted spokespeople in different communities. Topics covered everything from the impact of the vaccine on fertility to the relationship between the vaccine and faith. They were marketed as a way for people to have their questions answered, rather than being a hard sell on the vaccine. This was to encourage more people to come along and make their own mind up after hearing the facts. In total, four webinars were organised hosted by trusted voices ranging from GPs to faith leaders. After each session, key highlights were uploaded to the council's YouTube channel, maximising reach and allowing people to share on through their networks. The council employed a tactic that would have the biggest impact, but scaled this up using technology.

The result: The result was record-breaking participation in a public meeting, with over 2,000 attendees across all webinars and engagement with the highlights shared online following the meeting ranging from a few hundred views to over 5,000 for the most popular. While difficult to quantify the successful rate of uplift in vaccine uptake in certain communities, there was definitely a positive shift in some, such as the Pakistani and Bengali communities, around the time the targeted webinar was held.

YOUR BRENT

Autumn 2022 www.brent.gov.uk/yourbrent

The magazine about life in Brent, published by Brent Council

Brent

Growing through tough times

COST OF LIVING
Supporting you with the cost of living
Page 23

THE COST OF LIVING
SUPPORTING YOU WITH

BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY
Covid and flu boosters available to protect you
Page 9

Her Majesty The Queen
1926–2022
Page 36

What does the future hold?

There are so many opportunities for digital remastering to help traditional channels continue to grow and evolve. Outdoor advertisers have taken us from the print poster installed by someone with a ladder and wallpaper paste to current campaigns on programmable digital screens tailored for specific locations and audiences. Meanwhile, in-home TV advertising has gone well beyond traditional TV advertising starting with a six-figure budget; to creating the ability to send relevant adverts directly into someone's home. Many councils are already leading the way, with plenty of examples of best practice showing the art of the possible.

Taking the campaign in-home: Hampshire's fostering campaign

The challenge: *Fostering Hampshire's winter campaign from 2021 was a pioneering campaign aimed at galvanising residents to become foster carers in their community – a much needed ask considering over 1,600 children are in the care of Hampshire County Council at any one time.*

What they did: *Hampshire needed to both increase the number of residents in the 'consideration phase' by talking up the concept of fostering; as well as actively getting residents to engage and make the first steps of an application. As part of a much wider campaign, the team used a mix of paid display ads as well as partnering with Sky Adsmart to target in-home adverts to those MOSAIC groups that were most likely to become foster carers (including 'solo retirees' to 'mature workers'). They also used paid social media and radio for broader awareness raising, as well as physical and virtual events. The in-house creative team delivered an animation for a more efficient production process compared to using real-life case studies. A 'John Lewis style narrative' was developed to get across a touching and emotional connection of providing a 'good start in life' to the main character in the animation. This was critical during a period of the year (autumn/winter) when fostering typically struggles to gain traction in the community.*

The result: *A resounding success reflected by the huge growth at an awareness level. Social media engagement and record-breaking web traffic saw 4000 hits in total. This was combined with an almost doubling of previous enquiry levels (around 80 during December, almost 100% above seasonal winter targets for formal foster carer enquiries, as well as higher numbers in subsequent months). The campaign continued to be a platform for the organisation in 2022 to push to rural communities. These communities have lower rates of foster carers and have become more engaged in the process.*

Chapter 3: Where are the areas of opportunity to use new technology?

It's natural for organisations to explore opportunities to use technologies to improve processes, enhance experiences, enable efficiencies or reap financial benefits. Communicators are no different, having always been attracted to technology solutions that move away from the traditional channels of press and broadcast media to communicate to their audiences and gain the desired outcome.

For those that have worked in the industry long enough, they know that the adoption of new, smarter technology moved slowly at first, with methods like text messaging and target adverts left to the big players with big budgets. However over the last decade this changed and it is no longer only a game for those with deep pockets. With the explosion of data sharing, digital globalisation and audiences' willingness to embrace new trends, new technologies have quickly evolved from mass WhatsApp messages to virtual reality and augmented reality, and are quickly becoming regular tools in every communicator's arsenal.

So, what is the future of technology in relation to public sector communications and what on earth do words like metaverse and Web3 really mean?

Metaverse and Web3 technologies

The world is getting smaller and smaller as more people connect with one another over networked computerised systems and these enhanced connections speed up reaction times as people can communicate more easily.

Controversially, there are two opposing popular opinions about the Metaverse. While the metaverse does not yet exist - there is not yet one space that is an entirely connected online ecosystem - there are many 'walled gardens'. On the other hand, global business McKinsey tells us that the Metaverse value will total $5 trillion by 2030.

So how do we start to make sense of this for public service communicators? Let's not debate the state of the Metaverse, but rather, consider the Web3 technologies that underpin what we can now do, and the early use and good practice we are seeing.

Web3 Technologies include Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and holo-telepresence - the broadcasting of realistic, life-sized, interactive 3D holographic video. Blockchain technology allows decentralised communities to own and vote on issues that are important to them, and makes it difficult or impossible to change, hack, or cheat the system.

There are many ways in which the public sector can embrace these emerging technologies to offer deeper engagement. This is particularly pertinent for those working in communications, consultation, regeneration, or public realm for example, where digital placemaking, building

online communities of interest and the smart use of AR, VR and AI can enable greater interactivity and engagement.

## *Farnham's future with a jet-pack: Virtual Reality in Surrey*

The challenge: Surrey County Council teamed up with specialist VR provider Digital Urban, using grant funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to try and engage a younger audience around the Farnham town centre consultation. Previous consultations had seen just six per cent of respondents coming from 18 to 35-year-olds, so they decided to test if using virtual reality (VR) would encourage a greater number of younger people to have their say.

What they did: Digital Urban used a digital model of Farnham town centre in a game where participants could fly around the town using jetpacks to experience what two different proposals for the town would look like in reality.

Surrey secured the use of an empty shop in the town, and also attended a local music event and held a roadshow outside Farnham Leisure Centre. These were promoted through social media, and the innovative idea also attracted local press interest with coverage in the local paper, BBC Radio Surrey and regional television bulletins.

The result: The events were a great success, with hundreds of people trying the virtual reality or just asking about the proposals including the young target audience, children and even some 80-year-olds. Compared to the traditional exhibitions held earlier in the consultation, the VR events were more relaxed, more engaging and much better attended. The events also prompted an increase in responses to the formal consultation.

Using engaging techniques such as VR can help attract people who don't normally interact with council consultations. This can help not just with planning consultations, but with all engagement exercises.
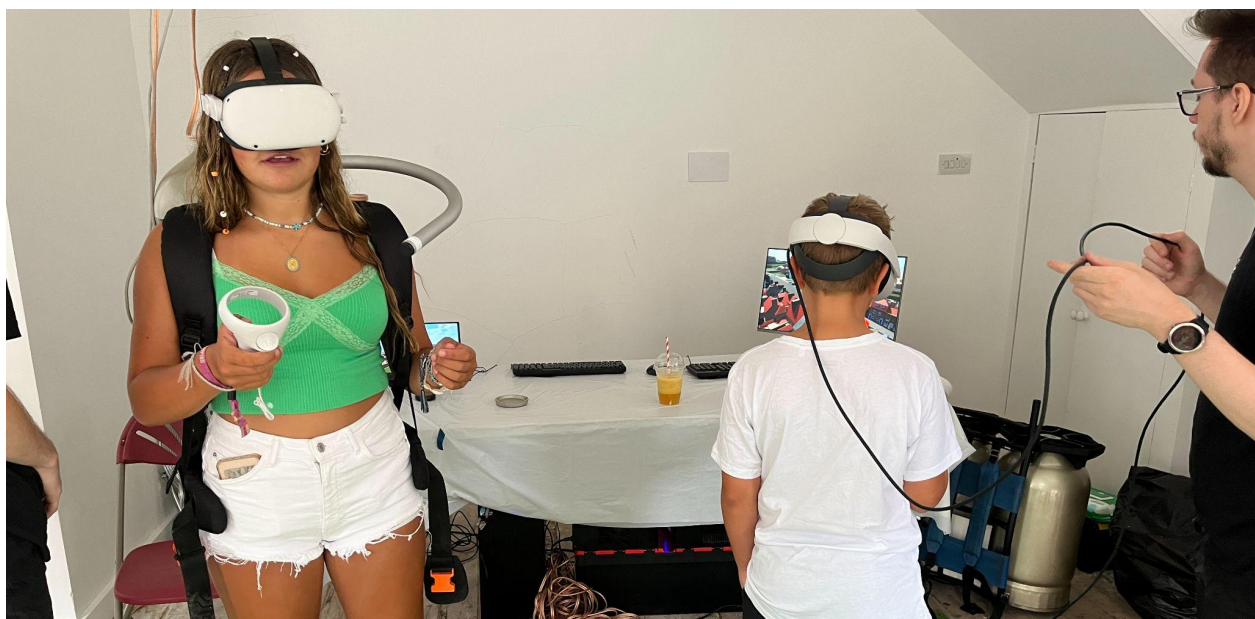
There are plenty of other good examples from councils in the UK today. Technology that allows for greater interactivity is already being used in many different ways, to deliver many different objectives. We've seen:

- Hull Council using Augmented Reality, adding fairies and dinosaurs in parks to encourage families to spend more time together, get outdoors and be active in Hull's green spaces.

- Northampton Council uses Augmented Reality to discover history 'a walk in the past', showcasing personalities of the past come to life and tell the story of how they impacted the county. This playful, engaging content celebrates the local area, and because it's digital, can be adapted quickly, regularly and in response to key dates in the calendar. The council's 'Discover Christmas' AR experience offers an immersive trail for children for example.

- Leeds Council launched a live web chat service which helped users find what they needed more efficiently. It was set up to help people online, guiding them through processes to help reduce resource cost as it means telephone or face-to-face conversations aren't needed. The transition to live web chat from phone calls helped to save Leeds Council £18,360 over eight months. On top of this, more than 80% of those with enquiries stated their enquiry had been resolved successfully.

Internationally and in other sectors, we're also seeing some great examples:

- Amnesty International has used Augmented Reality in a hard hitting campaign to influence policy. In 2021, the 'Campaign to Stop Killer Robots' launched, with a petition calling on all governments to voice their support for negotiations on a new international law on autonomy in weapons systems. Amnesty created filters that could be used on social media platforms - Instagram and Facebook and a large version of the filter was also on display as an interactive experience at Westfield Stratford City in London for two weeks. In doing so, Amnesty was able to bring a very political issue into a world that people use every day - social media, making it accessible, key to any successful campaign.

- The Swedish Government has been using Augmented Reality in cultural establishments in Sweden, bringing dead artists back to life in venues where they played. It's even happened in the UK - the ABBA Voyage concert in London as an example.

- In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, administrators have deployed adaptive traffic signals which change the lights based on actual traffic to reduce commute times and fuel consumption. The smart traffic system has reduced travel delays in Pittsburgh by about 20 to 25 percent and these smart crossings have been trialled in the UK.

- In Austin, Texas, rough sleepers are able to get a digital identity that's stored via blockchain so they don't have to carry around a physical identification card.

- Scandinavian governments are seeking to establish blockchain identity for their citizens within the next three years - providing individuals with control over their own data and who they share it with, from employment history to medical records.

While we can marvel at the advances in technology and those that are early adopters, there is still an uphill battle before it becomes a mainstream communications tool.

Challenges include a lack of understanding and a perception that VR and AR are immersive experiences which fail to provide value or use outside of gaming. Like any good communications approach, decisions should be underpinned by data, insight and evidence based. However, data and insight can be hard to find when it comes to emerging technologies, so it's a bold move to push yourself out into the digital wilderness. Education and understanding of these technologies and the ability to translate the benefits of them into language decision makers can understand is critical to adoption.

The evolution of the internet will involve more spatial technologies, not all immersive, some accessible by phone, tablet or browser offering participants a greater degree of interactivity and engagement than existing media such as audio spatial rooms. [Curate42's accessible Metaverse platform enables you to free roam and mingle on screen in interactive rooms](), where you can pin video content that plays locally on arrival or take surveys all in one space and speak to and see just the people that are near you. For the public sector holding sensitive meetings remotely, such as Foster Carers inductions or getting people to engage with consultation, the engagement is much greater and richer than a traditional web page.

Chapter 4: The Future is almost here: But is there anyone out there?

While new methods and communications tactics seem to emerge daily, no one is deserting the old ones. The reality is most communication plans will have a mixture of both, depending on the campaign, objective and the audience. The content is also just as important as the vehicle used to distribute it. Thinking about music as an example, the CD or streaming platform might be what convinces someone to listen but it is the quality of the music they stay for. Content will similarly need to evolve to suit the channels. It is a tricky balancing act to keep all these plates spinning, but an exciting challenge.

There are plenty of other good examples from councils using new methods and applying them to old problems that continue to challenge communicators. This chapter features some examples to show how the future is already here.

London Borough of Wandsworth: two way conversations

The challenge: London Borough of Wandsworth's partnership with Hello Lamp Post is a great example of applying new technology to address an age-old problem that has bothered many local authorities for decades: fly-tipping. The council used QR codes and community engagement to encourage two-way conversations so their local residents were better able to understand an area or space and give real-time feedback.

What they did: Wandsworth Council worked with Hello Lamp Post to reduce instances of fly-tipping, and to help them quickly react when it occurred. The platform was used as a communications channel with signage across hotspots in the borough, creating a Neighbourhood Watch style deterrence whilst allowing the public to alert the council team anywhere, 24/7, when fly-tipping occurs.

Quite simply, the council wanted to give Wandsworth residents a method to report fly-tipping and deter the would-be fly-tippers. This was achieved by implementing a cost-effective QR code system connecting the council with residents, enabling immediate, simple and anonymous reporting. The QR codes were displayed on signs placed strategically on lamp posts across the borough, especially in the worst affected hotspots. This automated the process of collecting fly-tipping reports, saving staff time to focus on other priorities.

The result: Increased frequency of fly-tipping reports, reduced instances of fly-tipping and improved trust and communication between the council and residents.

Waltham Forest: Choose Local: Support Everyone.

However, let's not overlook traditional external channels such as out of home. Waltham Forest, with their award winning Choose Local: Support Everyone campaign, shows the value of out of home working in campaigns as part of an integrated marketing mix.

The challenge: After the shock of Covid-19, to save the high streets and encourage people to support their local businesses again, the council realised a campaign was needed to bring the community together and remind people to choose local.

What they did: The visual approach made local businesses and their owners the stars, coupled with short memorable calls to action. The visual campaign was rolled out across a range of out of home sites, including hoardings, billboards and street level displays. This was supported by varied digital assets (across social media and web), print adverts, posters, and stickers.

The result: 366 people made recommendations, digital engagement was double the average and the amount of visitors to the campaign landing page in the first two months nearly tripled. The big one though, 97% of people who saw the campaign were persuaded to shop locally. It really drives home the importance of not overestimating the value of social media. The post campaign survey showed that of the people who saw the campaign, 32% saw it on outdoor advertising sites (much more than social media at 10%). This absolutely demonstrates the importance of using all the channels in an integrated marketing campaign.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, looking back across different channels and how they have been (and are being) used, is useful in assessing how the future of channels may look.

External communications channels are always evolving, like fashion some even come in and out of favour over many years. The QR code was practically obsolete before Covid-19 came and changed everything.

Looking at how old and new channels have been used for different purposes but with strikingly impressive outcomes has demonstrated the importance of never completely ditching something from your comms toolbox, and always considering the whole landscape when planning campaigns.

As professional communicators know, a good campaign always boils down to knowing what the objectives are from the outset, and identifying target audiences.

Then it's all about where those audiences are, and how they best engage with information.

Successful campaigns will always have consideration for the full breadth of channels, and often use a mix of them, to either amplify reach and build off one another, or to simply reach distinct audience segments with the same message delivered in different ways.

It's important to understand all the channels available to us as public sector communicators, and explore how they can be used. We should challenge ourselves to try new things, to have an idea and run with it, to share and learn from others.

Sometimes stepping into the unknown can be the most daunting but ultimately fruitful endeavour (and it'll always impress local leadership when augmented reality is used to grab the attention of young people and engage them with a council service).

But as this White Paper has also pointed out – don't lose sight of the traditional, tried and tested channels. These have stood the test of time for a reason: they work. Channels also evolve – whether it's local democracy reporters or interacting with journalists on social media, or outdoor advertising moving from a man on a ladder with wallpaper paste to immediately adaptable digital screens.

It's important to stay across all emerging developments, and work with peers and providers to use old channels to deliver new solutions. LGcomms networks and events are an effective way to do this, as well as engaging with other professional bodies, private suppliers, and fellow communicators.

Recommendations

Here are seven simple recommendations to remember when developing communications plans:

- Never ignore the **classics**

- **Try, test** and **learn**

- Understand **where your audiences are**, and who they trust

- **Content is still the key** no matter the channel used

- Tap into the unknown and **embrace the experts** - especially if there is a skills gap

- Always consider the **full mix of channels**

- **Explore the future**, the future is here!

Useful Links

Resources

LGcomms - [Home - LGcomms](#)

Local Government Association Comms Hub - [Comms Hub – communications support | Local Government Association](#)

Local Government Association Communications & Parliamentary Network - [Communications support: Communications and Parliamentary Network | Local Government Association](#)

Local Government Association Case Studies Hub - [Case studies | Local Government Association](#)

Blogs

The future of external comms channels - [The future for external comms channels - LGcomms](#)

[Blog: Lessons from a social media expert - LGcomms](#)

The value of accessibility for public sector websites - [Blog: Speaking plainly - LGcomms](#)

LGcomms

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