



andreas christophorou & darren caveney

THE MYSTERIES OF THE
COMMS STRATEGY.

AND HOW TO BUILD A
GOOD ONE.

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Power of the 80/20 rule

Darren Caveney says the councils with the most clear and consistent communications strategies tend to fare best – and he sets out a simple hierarchy of plans that will lead to success

As I write this, England's mens' batters are dispatching Australia's weary bowlers to all parts of the ground in the final Ashes Test... bear with me if you're not an England cricket fan, there is a point to all this.

England's now famed 'Baz Ball' has taken the cricketing world by storm. It is about challenging some of the usual conventions of the game, scoring runs quickly and pressuring the opposition at all times. It is also about entertainment. It flowed from a poor run of results by the England side, which was all a bit negative, scratchy and, well, reactive.

A new coach came in. A new mindset with him and a plan of attack that seizes the initiative and refuses to be bowed by the challenges thrown at them.

It is very much a strategic decision with a clear approach which everyone in the team understands and where they fit into it. And, at the time of writing it is going to plan.

Can any of this really apply to local government strategy?

Perhaps I am stretching the analogy, but when we think about how communication works within local government it is those councils with very clear and consistent strategies who tend to fare best.

I've seen and worked with both strategic organisations and reactive ones and I know which ones I preferred. The reactive ones can be chaotic, and at their worst, quite dispiriting when you have the feeling

that despite all your best efforts you are not effecting much in the way of positive change. This is hard for any individual and team to break free from – it has to be a whole organisation effort. A bit like Baz Ball.

The 80/20 rule strikes again

The 80/20 rule can be applied to many things – and for sure it can to communications strategies. A large council delivers so many services – some of them complex. This can mean it is difficult to stick to a plan when there are so many competing demands.

There will always be new challenges and emergencies to support too – think Ukraine when the war began last year. Councils had to scramble quickly to be able to support Ukrainians fleeing to safety in the UK. They responded so well too – councils almost always do when it is really needed.

There will always be leftfield demand at an organisational level and which flows into the 'to-do' lists of comms teams as a result. I call it the 'comms side wash' It has always been there and it always will be in local government.

However, the planned/reactive ratio should be in the order of 80/20. A comms team can deal with that and develop and deliver effective strategies to support the organisation's key agreed and published priorities. Obviously, if you give them 20 priorities to deliver against they will struggle, unless they are awash with resources.

Keeping the number of priorities realistic is important otherwise they are not really priorities, just a big list.

What a comms team cannot deal with is a 20/80 scenario – whereby in the region of 80% of their activity is reacting to different demands every day and every week without a clear plan and rationale to them. It is a horrible place to be.

To add to their woes the team are often then criticised for 'not being strategic'. Warning signs of this are a flurry of last minute press releases being asked for on a regular basis and a lack of a signed-up to council communications strategy. What is the answer?

It is simple, and with a hierarchy of plans in place:

- There is a council plan
- In it, the key organisational priorities are clearly stated
- Each priority has a service level business plan containing data and insights from which SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) objectives are agreed
- The councils' communications strategy flows from the council plan and the service business plans
- Individual communications or campaign plans support these priorities and the bulk of the team's resources are dedicated to them because it has been agreed that this is the most important work to the council and its residents. Councils like Liverpool and



Tower Hamlets do this very well.

In the Tower Hamlets strategy, each campaign is graded as Gold, Silver or Bronze so that it is clear what level of time and resources will be given over to them. This helps to manage internal expectations.

Of course, it is easy to shout advice from afar and much more difficult to actually deliver it, but that is the

beauty of the 80/20 rule – it does allow some flexibility to manage the unforeseen.

Does your communications strategy meet the 80/20 test?

The Baz Ball strategy worked pretty well in the end. But for rain in Manchester, England would have won the series. But that is the point isn't it? No strategy will

ever be perfect, but it can definitely improve you. ▶

Darren Caveney is owner and creator of **comms2point0** and specialist consultancy **Creative Communicators Ltd**

@darrencaveney

Tower Hamlets' golden communications thread

Communications needs to be the business of everyone in a council, and if the service is just treated as a matter of tactics you are doing no more than stumbling along, says **Andreas Christophorou**

Tower Hamlets is the fastest-growing and most densely populated place in the country. We have one of the highest economic outputs with Canary Wharf, some of London's best destinations, and we are one of the most diverse and historic places in the UK. But we are also a place of contrasts. As an inner-city borough, we have some of the highest levels of poverty in the country, while there is also extreme wealth.

When it comes to degrees of separation, it often feels like almost everything is connected to Tower Hamlets in some way. That puts a lot of pressure on communications.

It is easy to get sucked into a reactive approach, and it is not a job for the faint-hearted, but on the other hand, we have a set of assets that mean we have opportunities that we would not have elsewhere.

We were very aware of these pressures when we rebuilt our communications service. To ensure around 70% of our communications are proactive we put three pillars in place that have served us well.

The first pillar is for a strategic communications function to be successful, it needs to be everyone's business.

A golden communications thread runs through our council from communications being part of the corporate leadership team (CLT), to responsibility running through every departmental leadership team meeting, down to team meetings and even staff objectives.

It must be embraced as a strategic function that also delivers tactical communications. If it is just treated as tactical, you are stumbling along, and your communications service is going to get burned out.

We are a centralised service in the chief executive's office. This means every piece of communications must come through us so we know everything that is happening, ensure consistent standards, and use every communication and engagement to build and retain our audiences.

We can only own our reputation if we know everything that is happening, so every week CLT goes through our communications grid which everyone should feed into.

The second pillar is our communications strategy. As a key corporate document, it is embedded in the organisation from inductions to staff engagement. Last month I had the privilege of talking to 2,000 officers at our staff conference about the strategy, our council and place narratives, and our TH IS place campaign. www.towerhamlets.is

The first sentence says: 'This is a strategy for the

whole council. Every officer and member is responsible for its delivery'.

Its first objective to 'tell our story'. If we don't, someone will tell it for us, and they do. When we researched our place campaign, we found 24% of the most shared stories on social media about Tower Hamlets were from all-right websites – many from overseas.

A centralised budget allows for a strategic approach to communications, rather than one based on which service shouts loudest or has the most money

It goes on to say there are three ingredients to communications – excellent content, the right channels, and the right audience. All three support each other. The best content comes from services, which is why every council officer is so important.

The third pillar is a centralised campaigns budget which is used to deliver campaigns aligned to our strategic plan. Having a centralised budget allows for a strategic approach to communications, rather than one based on which service shouts loudest or has the most money.

The other two pillars are measurement and self-

promotion. The latter is something that communications services can neglect.

We know communications can get taken for granted. Councils' budgets are under pressure and it is an easy option to cut communications only for the realisation later of its value in helping every service to achieve better outcomes.

Communications professionals have a role to play in showing their worth. We produce a detailed quarterly report for CLT and our cabinet which includes all our audience figures, along with analysis of our channels and what content and campaigns have worked best.

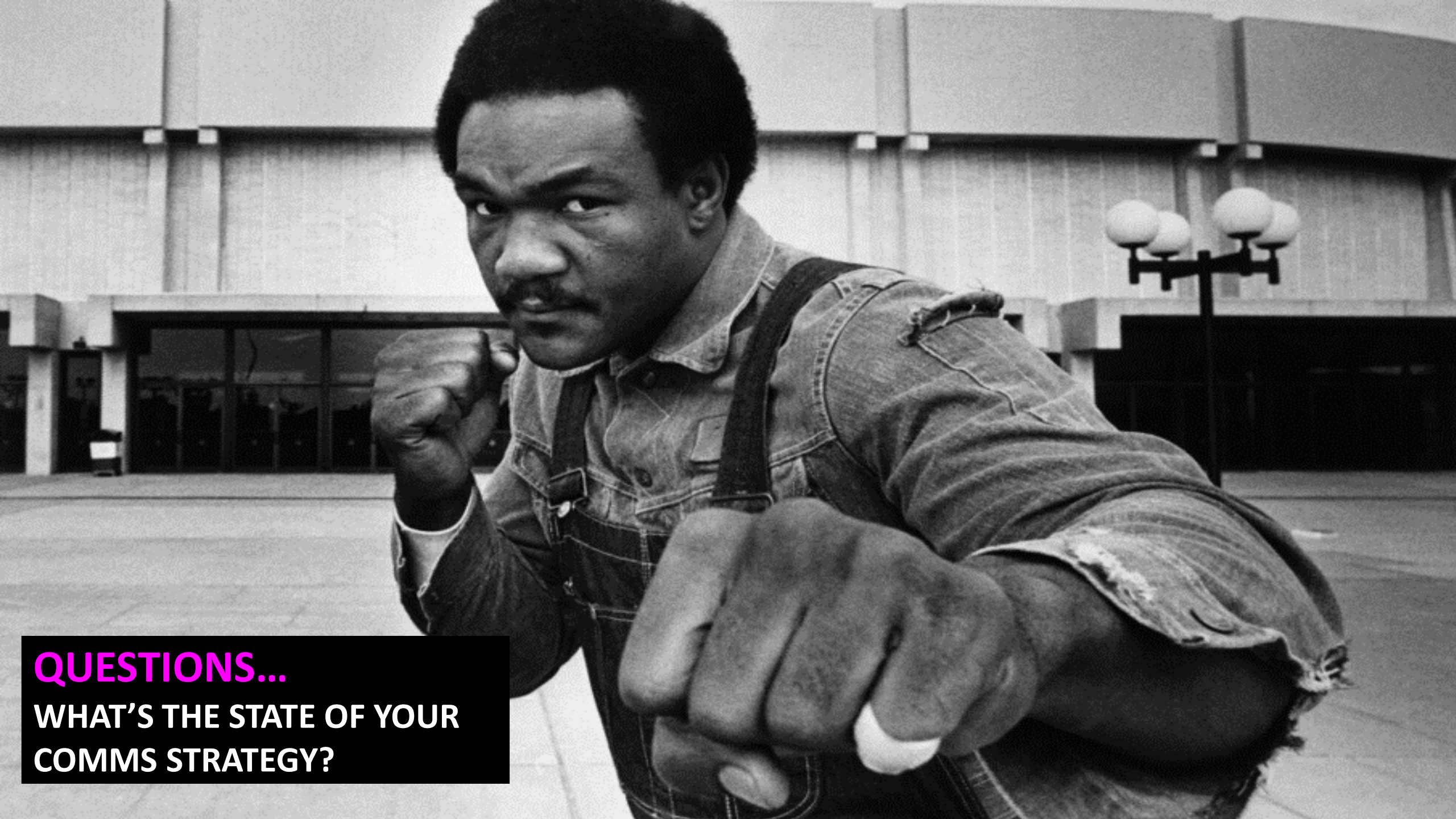
I also encourage staff to tell their story internally and to peers – to talk about the work they have put in and the outcomes achieved. It is understandable to take a breather after a campaign launch, but that is when you have all the content to promote your work.

These pillars have helped Tower Hamlets build its own direct audience of more than 250,000 residents. We have introduced initiatives such as our residents' panel to test ideas and we have trained more than 1,000 officers to be better communicators. Ultimately, if communications is prioritised as a strategic function, the whole council will benefit. ▶

Andreas Christophorou is director of communications and marketing at **Tower Hamlets LBC**

@TowerHamletsNow





QUESTIONS...

**WHAT'S THE STATE OF YOUR
COMMS STRATEGY?**

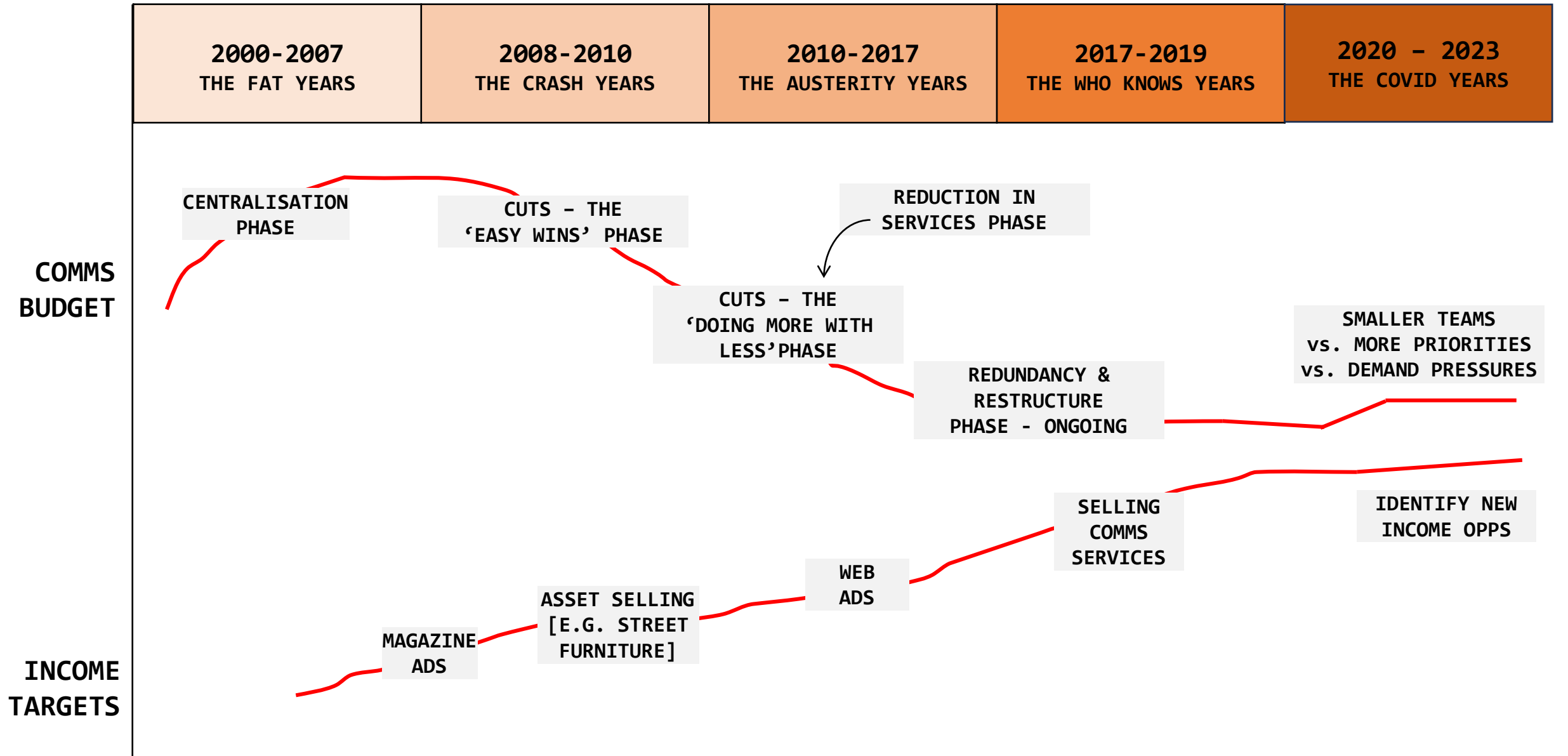
QUESTIONS

- 1. Do you have an up to date comms strategy?**
- 2. How would you rate it out of 10?**
- 3. What are the biggest issues with it?**

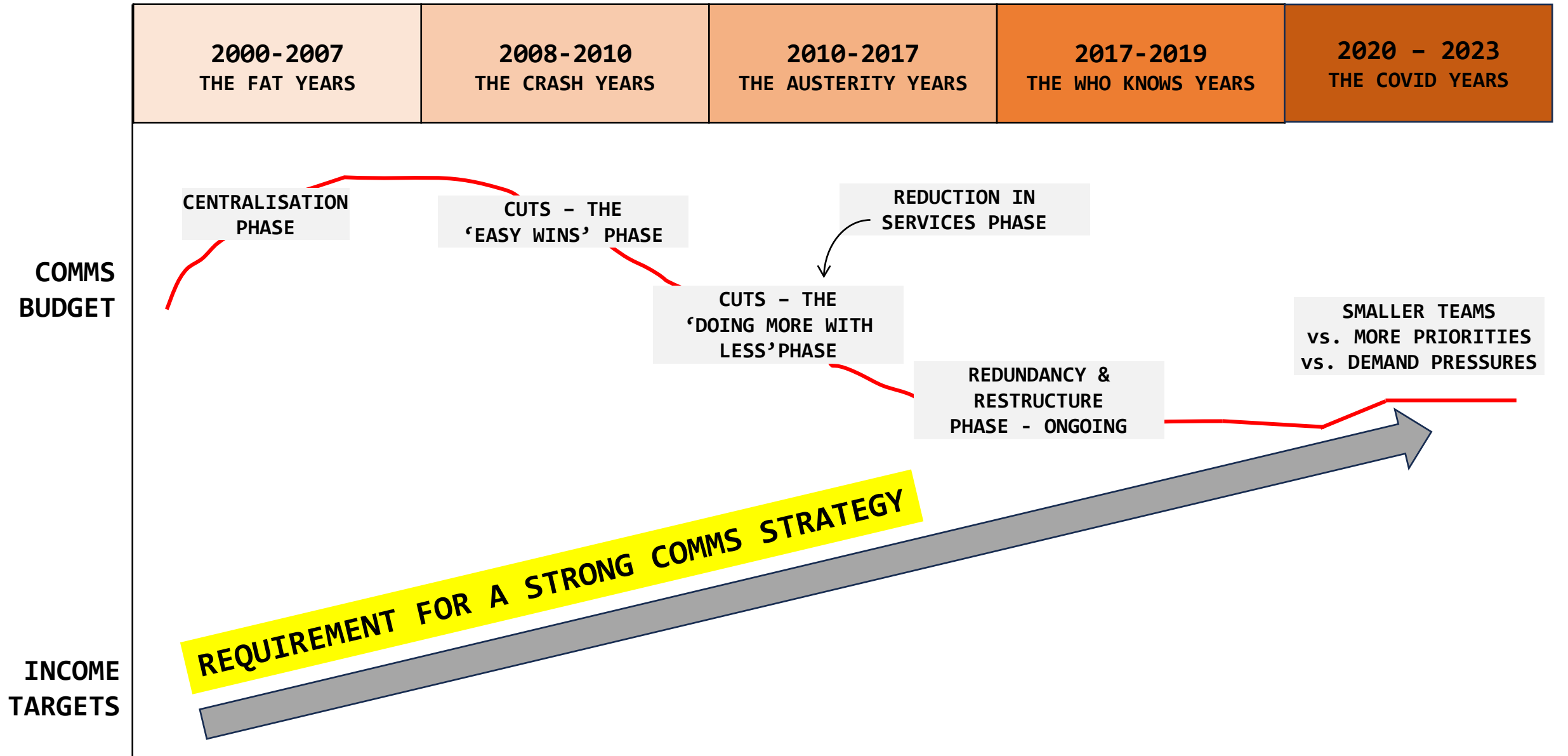
WHY WE NEED A STRATEGY: THE COMMS LANDSCAPE



THE PUBLIC SECTOR COMMS LANDSCAPE >> THE EVER GROWING CHALLENGES



THE PUBLIC SECTOR COMMS LANDSCAPE >> THE EVER GROWING CHALLENGES



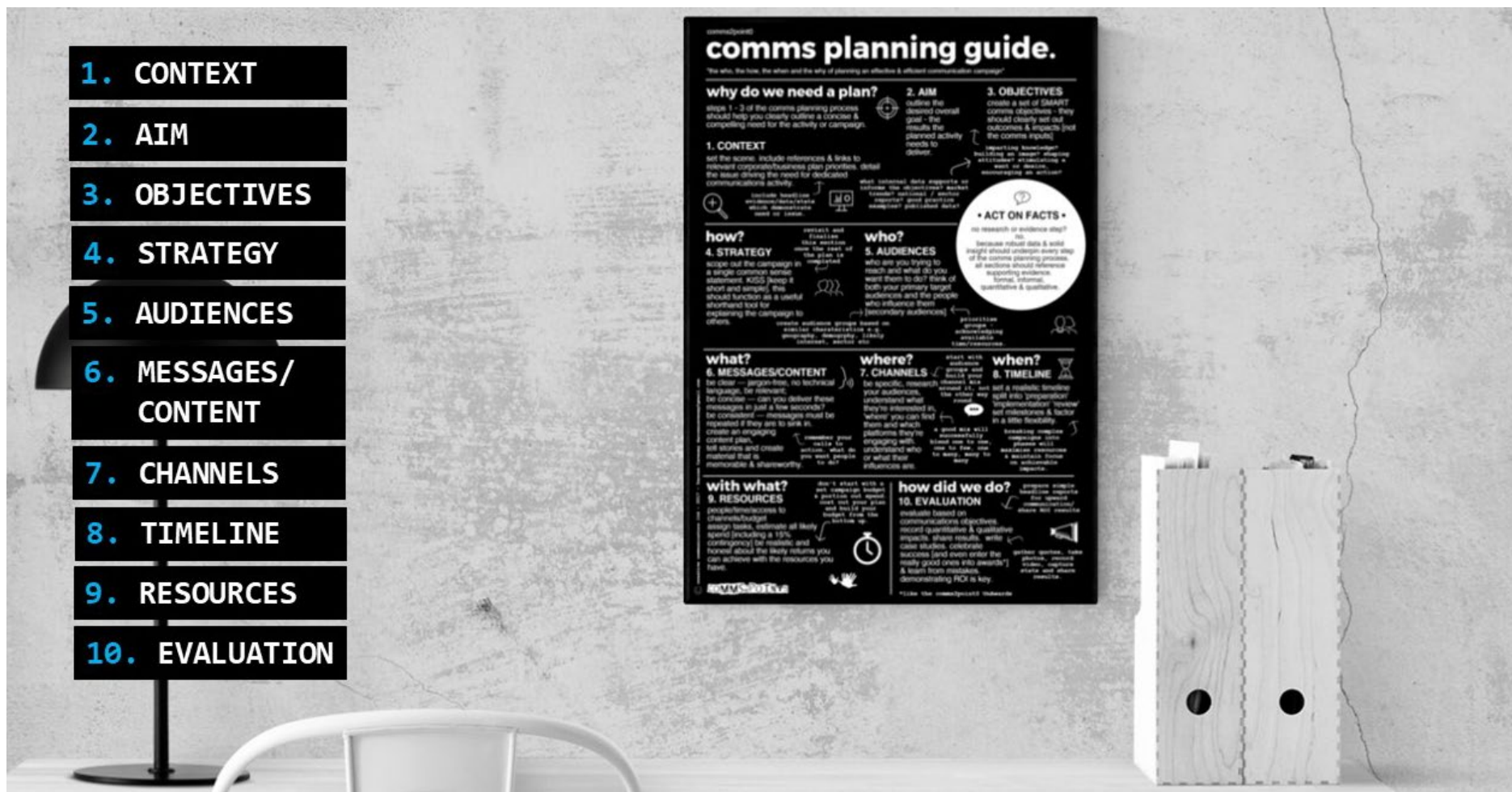
**7 CRITICAL
SUCCESS
FACTORS FOR
AN EFFECTIVE
COMMS
STRATEGY**



01: THE ESSENTIAL HIERARCHY OF PLANNING



02: AGREE YOUR PLANNING APPROACH AND TEMPLATE



03: MANAGING DEMAND – THE COMMS ‘SIDE-WASH’

NEW WORK REQUEST : YOUR BUSINESS CASE

DATE	
SUBMITTED BY	
YOUR TITLE/ROLE	
CONTACT DETAILS	

We are committed to ensuring our valuable resources are targeted to where they can make the greatest impact on our agreed organisational priorities. In order for us to assess your work request against these priorities – and for us to ensure we assign the appropriate resources to your request - it would be helpful if you could provide some additional information about the work you would like us to deliver.

Your support is much appreciated, we will be in contact with you to discuss your request shortly.

The Communications Team

THE TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT OR JOB

DOES THIS WORK ADDRESS AN AGREED ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITY AS SET OUT IN OUR BUSINESS PLAN? [Y/N]
IF SO, WHICH BUSINESS PRIORITY IS IT?

IS YOUR DIRECTOR/HEAD OF SERVICE AWARE OF THIS WORK REQUEST? [Y/N]

HAVE WE AGREED THIS WORK WITH YOU AS A PART OF OUR PLANNED ANNUAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY?

NEW WORK REQUEST : YOUR BUSINESS CASE

DOES YOUR PLANNED WORK HAVE SMART OBJECTIVES?
SPECIFIC, MEASURABLE, ACHIEVABLE, REALISTIC AND TIMELY

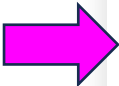
WHAT BUSINESS PROBLEM DOES THIS WORK SEEK TO SOLVE/WHAT BEHAVIOUR DOES IT SEEK TO CHANGE?

DO YOU HAVE THE NECESSARY DATA & EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT AND INFORM THIS WORK? PLEASE GIVE AN OVERVIEW.

HAVE YOU IDENTIFIED YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE? PLEASE PROVIDE DETAILS.

IS THERE A DEADLINE FOR THIS WORK?

DO YOU HAVE BUDGET AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT THIS WORK? [Y/N] PLEASE PROVIDE DETAILS.



04: THE 80/20 RULE



05: MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR TEAM'S RESOURCES

Skills Matrix

Plot your own skills and experiences, or your team's, here and score each activity out of 10 – current scores vs. target scores. Highlight the strengths, and allocate these to your forthcoming plans and campaigns. Address the gaps in your learning and development plans for the year.

	Strategy development/comms planning	PR & media relations	Internal comms	Stakeholder engagement/relationship building	Leadership
Skills & Experience					
Current activity/role					
Overall Score (out of 10)					
Target Score (out of 10)					
Development needed					

	Social media	Advice and counselling	Events	Campaigns	Content: Design / photography/video/podcasts
Skills & Experience					
Current activity/role					
Overall Score (out of 10)					
Target Score (out of 10)					
Development needed					



Skills Matrix



06:
WHAT IS YOUR STORY?
DEFINE IT, TELL IT WELL

resources to help

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how to create key messages and a strategic narrative

September 16, 2021



COMMS:FILES
powered by can

Had a flick through our new COMMS:FILES resource yet?

from internal comms to resident campaigns
file upon file of great work
by creative communicators,
searchable, free to all.

LOOKING TO ADD
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Building a narrative for your council

This toolkit looks at why and how a more engaging approach to developing and communicating a narrative works, and offers practical models and approaches.

Developing a council narrative – the ‘why’ of your organisation is a fundamental part of an effective communications strategy. It defines an organisation’s purpose; it brings people together around that purpose. It directs action, and in a democracy, it gives people a marker against which a public body can be held to account.

This toolkit looks at why and how a more engaging approach to developing and communicating a narrative works, and offers some practical models and approaches you can use right now.

It also unveils a new post-pandemic One Story for local government, which you can use to challenge thinking in your organisation and as a template for your own local narrative.

Comms Hub – communications support

Welcome to Comms Hub – our online resource to help you to develop and deliver more effective communications

In this section:

Chapter 1: An introduction to building your organisation’s narrative

Developing a council narrative – the “why” of your organisation – has been seen for

Chapter 2: Why does narrative matter and why now?

Public services’ experiences during the global pandemic that hit the UK in early 2020 showed that effective professional

Chapter 3: The building blocks of your narrative

Research shows that the more the narrative is owned and shaped collectively, the more it will make a

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07: MAKE THE TIME TO BE CREATIVE



“The truth about creativity is that it tends to thrive only when we create space for it”

Bruce Daisley