Communications Peer Review
Middlesbrough Council
29-31 March 2017
Feedback Report
1. **Purpose of report**

This report provides a summary of the findings of the Middlesbrough Council communications peer review. It builds on the main messages which were discussed with leading members and officers from the council at our feedback session on 31 March 2017. It is intended to provide a basis for consideration and action by the council to enhance the effectiveness of its communications activity and ensure the best use of resources deployed to support those.

2. **Scope and focus**

The peer review was commissioned by the council at what is an important milestone in terms of its ambitions for Middlesbrough and desire to improve communications. This is set against a backdrop of difficult challenges – including the desire to attract investment and the need to change resident behaviours.

Although it is important to stress this was not a review of the council’s communications function itself, the restructure and centralisation of the team in 2016 means this was an opportune time to assess whether the current model is the right one to meet the council’s ambitions. In addition, the council’s new political and officer leadership recognises the strategic importance of communications and has a genuine ambition to improve.

With all of the above in mind the council chose the opportunity to engage in a peer review, which focused on four core themes:

- **Structure, capability, capacity and resources:** Is the current model for delivering communications the right one? Are resources managed effectively and sufficient to meet demand and expectation? Is there a robust system in place for planning activity, processes and evaluating outcomes?
- **Reputation:** How effective are the council’s communications with their external stakeholders (residents, the media and partners)?
- **Place branding:** How effective is the council at promoting Middlesbrough’s investment and growth potential? How effectively does the council work with partners to communicate its ambitions and priorities for the area?
- **Role of members:** Are members supported to communicate their aspirations for the council and kept well informed?
- **Internal communications:** How effective are the council’s internal communications at informing and engaging staff to act as ambassadors for the council? Are communications channels used to best effect to achieve this aim?

3. **The peer team and process**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and were agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

- Paul Masterman, Associate, LGA
- Cllr Jon Collins, Leader, Nottingham City Council
It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils’ needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council’s own performance and improvement focus. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government communications to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information including the council’s corporate strategy, communications strategies and position statement.

The team then spent three days onsite in Middlesbrough, during which they:

- spoke to more than 75 people, including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- gathered information and views from around 35 interviews, focus groups and meetings
- collectively spent more than 125 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending around four weeks in Middlesbrough

4. **Principles of good communications**

In undertaking its work, the team was guided by an understanding of the importance of good communications and how to achieve these. The LGA has found the following to be generally characteristic of effective communications across the councils that it works with:

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<th>Why is good communications important?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Articulates the ambition for your area</td>
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<td>• Improves corporate and personal reputation</td>
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<td>• Supports good political leadership</td>
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<td>• Helps engagement – residents, partners and staff</td>
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<td>• Builds trust</td>
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<td>• Rallies advocates</td>
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<td>• Drives change and can deliver savings</td>
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<td>• Attracts investment (and good people)</td>
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<td>• Can be used to manage performance</td>
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<td>• Strengthens public support and understanding</td>
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<th>What does good communications look like?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Leadership</strong> - Clarity of purpose and commitment</td>
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• **Brand** - What you stand for, values and trust
• **A clear vision** - be ambitious first…and then realistic!
• Be **authentic** to your local area
• **Strategic approach to communications** - Communication without strategy does not work
  • A corporately agreed, fully evaluated **annual communications plan** - not just sending out ad hoc stuff!
  • All **communications** activity **based on research and insight**
  • All **campaigns to be linked to corporate priorities** and resourced accordingly
• **Invest in evaluation**
• Ensure **communications** is **owned by everyone**

These general principles and the experience of the peer team have guided it in identifying the key issues in Middlesbrough, formulating findings and suggesting actions the council should take in addressing these issues. We believe the council should also keep referring back to these principles to ensure that its approach to communications continues to develop in the most appropriate way.

5. **Executive summary**

Middlesbrough is changing – as a local authority and as a place.

The council is ambitious for the local area and its residents, and the new political and officer leadership is fostering a noticeable change in culture within the organisation.

We were impressed by the aspiration that clearly exists across the council for a new and different future for the area. A number of exciting and high profile developments have been completed or are underway. Middlesbrough’s cultural offer is increasing along with its economic potential. This is, in turn, growing the council’s optimism. As one backbench councillor put it to us during the review: ‘We are regenerating our enthusiasm’.

The council has started to shift its narrative from highlighting Middlesbrough’s economic and social challenges towards a focus on the area’s growth potential. Attracting investment is seen as crucial to the future funding of local services. As well as starting to tell a different story, the council is also seeking to reduce demand and change behaviours as it seeks a sustainable future.

Effective communications and engagement will be critical to making a success of these ambitious agendas. There is clearly a recognition from the council’s leadership of the strategic importance of communications, and a shared desire to challenge and improve. This momentum now needs to be harnessed and evidenced with effective and sustained delivery.

Although we have started to see the green shoots of a different approach to how the council communicates, a lack of confidence has held the organisation back for too long.
There has been a reluctance to tell good news stories through a fear of being criticised. Deliberate decisions have sometimes been taken not to link popular initiatives to Middlesbrough Council in case they become unpopular by association. This has led to a multitude of brands for different council services and confusion amongst citizens, partners and those you need to influence.

A more confident, outward looking and proactive approach to communications will also help counter balance some of the more critical voices that do undoubtedly exist. But although a widespread view had developed that the council is unpopular in some quarters, the absence of a resident survey makes the extent of this difficult to determine. Any negative perceptions are unlikely to change whilst the council avoids seeking due credit for the popular services people value, enjoy and depend upon. The lack of insight into the perceptions and drivers of your audiences also means that decisions on communications rely too often on guesswork and/or “what we have always done”.

The development of a new place brand is understandably seen as vital for Middlesbrough’s future prosperity. Whilst developing an attractive story for potential investors is important, it will need to fit in with the overall vision for the council and cannot afford to be something that exists in the abstract, or disconnected from the wider work of the authority.

As well as a vision for Middlesbrough, we believe the council also needs a fresh narrative about how it is transforming itself to improve local people’s lives. A more coherent and understood identity for the council and the everyday services it provides is a prerequisite for an effective place brand. It is important that residents understand how investment into the area benefits them and their communities – that the overall vision is grounded in their everyday experiences and can help grow the sense of civic pride.

An effective communications function, operating at a strategic level in the organisation, will help the council achieve these objectives. Definite progress has been made since the centralisation of the service last year, but there remains a long way to go. Although the council has adopted the right approach to delivering its communications, we are unconvinced the best model is currently in place to do what the council needs for the future.

6. Feedback

6.1 Structure, capacity, capability and resources

The council’s communications team was restructured and centralised following a review in 2016.

Moving away from the previous model – where communications activity was largely carried out by individual service areas and only the press office operated as a central function – has brought the council in line with industry best practice. The vast majority of councils centralise the bulk of their communications activity¹ in order to ensure it is linked to corporate priorities and provides better value for money.

¹ LGA 2016 Heads of Communications Survey
People we spoke to were complimentary about individual members of the team, and there is a widespread consensus that the new model has brought about improvements to the council’s overall communications capacity. In particular, there is a sense that people who have joined the service over the last year have brought a professional approach to marketing and digital communications which had previously only existed in pockets. For example, a plan developed by the new marketing team to promote traded services such as catering has been well-received by the service and is expected to lead to increased revenue.

There has been definite progress towards a more shared, strategic and professional approach to communications through better engagement with other parts of the council. The Communications and Marketing Manager has started to foster a more joined-up approach with service areas, meeting with most of them to help inform a programme of planned campaigns or communications projects.

The launch of the Middlesbrough Investment Prospectus was rightly spoken of with pride during our discussions as an example of how the communications team is moving in the right direction. It is evidence of how planned, strategic communications can effectively articulate and support the council’s ambitions for the borough. Whilst there is a recognition of progress made over the last year, however, there remains a gap between the leadership’s aspirations for what the communications service should be providing and what is currently being delivered.

The full team has only been in place for a relatively short period of time and working more cohesively within an agreed approach - as one person put it to us: ‘(the team) is at the start of a journey’. But the immediate challenges facing the council and the area mean this progress needs to be accelerated.

There are currently cultural and structural barriers to the provision of a first-class communications service at Middlesbrough Council. Despite the creation of a centralised team, many service areas have continued to commission their own communications activity. We were told of numerous instances of where substantial sums of money had been spent on campaigns and media work with external agencies.

If communications activity is guided only by a service area’s ability and willingness to pay, it can lead to a fragmented approach where different and competing messages are coming out from the council. Although many individual campaigns may have merit in their own right, uncoordinated and unplanned activity makes it harder for the most important messages to be heard.

Best practice demonstrates that all communications activity should be aligned with corporate priorities and resourced accordingly. The council’s Leadership Management Team (LMT) and Executive should develop an annual campaign plan with agreed budgets. This would undoubtedly reduce the amount of money across the council on various forms of communication, and ensure activity is more focussed on priorities and the Mayor’s vision. Additional campaigns could still be run in response to need or circumstances, but would require the agreement of a business case rather than simply the availability of resources.

Although many people spoke highly to us about individual members of the communications team, it is clear that some parts of the council often remain resistant to
listening to or respecting their professional advice. This is clearly a hangover from the
days when departments could run their own campaigns, but having now created a
corporate function it is important that it is properly recognised and its professional
advice implemented.

Despite the creation of a corporate communications function, there is a disconnect
between the activity of the media officers and the wider team. This is physically
illustrated by them not sitting together with their professional colleagues from other
communications disciplines. As an immediate first step this should be rectified, but there
is also a clear need to ensure media work is properly integrated into all other
communications activity.

The advice given by the council’s media officers is well regarded across the
organisation. However, it is largely seen as a reactive service and often appears to be
reliant on people within departments alerting them to positive, proactive media
opportunities and issues which might pose a reputational risk to the council.

The Marketing and Communications Manager started reporting to the Director of
Culture and Communities in February 2017, which is a positive step. For the
organisation to communicate strategically, it is important for communications to have a
voice when strategic decisions are being taken. We would encourage a greater role for
the Marketing and Communications Manager in forums such as LMT, even if it is to
contribute rather than become a full member of the body. The exact approach will be for
the council to decide, but we do believe a stronger communications voice needs to be
heard at a senior level in the organisation.

There is no monitoring or evaluation of media coverage, so it is difficult to assess the
effectiveness of the press team’s work. The lack of systematic evaluation is also a
problem across all the council’s communications activity. This is important – effective
evaluation will allow the organisation to make decisions about resourcing
communications based on what works and utilise limited budgets more effectively.
There are a number of communications activities being carried out by the council which
appear to be working well – such as a more conversational approach to social media –
but currently the council is not learning from, or exploiting these, effectively enough
through good evaluation. There are many effective evaluation frameworks from other
local authorities we would be happy to share – along with examples of how this is then
reported.

As set out earlier in the report, strategically the council has started to adopt the right
approach to communications – but we do not believe the right model is necessarily in
place.

The team is composed of 13 FTEs and three apprentices, which is broadly in line with
the average for metropolitan authorities in England\(^2\) - although it should be stressed that
many local authority communications teams, unlike Middlesbrough, do not have
responsibility for events. The issue is not necessarily the number of posts the council
has to deliver communications, but whether there are the right jobs, right skills and right
people.

\(^2\) LGA 2016 Heads of Communications Survey
Skills are currently being held within teams – marketing, events, internal communications digital and media – and there is little evidence of integrated working on campaigns and initiatives. This encourages a siloed approach to work, where a multitude of different people could be involved in any one issue. In our view the team is too structured around specialisms, and needs to be more issue and campaign focussed where people take responsibility for communicating across a variety of different channels.

The development of more all-round communications skills in the team would increase its resilience, and also make it easier to divert resources to priorities – i.e. putting the people where the needs and demands are greatest. It will require appropriate training and development for individuals, and we would also encourage the council to join low-cost professional organisations such as LG Communications and the PRCA.

At the same time, it is vital the council future-proofs its communications by ensuring it has the right skills to deliver on agendas which are paramount to its future – specifically behaviour change, channel shift and place branding.

6.2 Reputation

There is a widespread perception across the council that its reputation amongst many local residents is low.

A combination of critical local media coverage, historic issues and ingrained cynicism are felt to have contributed to a negative views of the authority – and the people who work for and represent it. This has had significant implications for the way the council communicates externally.

In reality, given that a resident survey has not been carried out for many years and there is currently no systematic way of capturing people’s views other than through service-specific consultations, it is not clear how satisfied or otherwise local people are with the council.

We would strongly recommend the council commissions a resident survey as soon as possible. As well as providing information about people’s views on local services, how much they trust the council and whether it provides value for money, a survey would also offer the opportunity to test perceptions about the future of Middlesbrough. This would be invaluable for the council’s work on place branding.

A survey would also provide insight into how people currently access and consume information – and would prefer to. For the effectiveness of the council’s communications, this information is vital. Currently, the council is communicating with residents through a variety of different channels without a proper understanding of how effective they are. The perceived importance and relevance of outlets such as the Gazette, for example, is largely based on assumption and opinion, rather than evidence.

Local media coverage of the council was discussed in most of our interviews. Some people were of the view that the council gets a broadly fair press, whilst others felt the tone was negative and turned residents off. Local media we spoke to also had differing views of the effectiveness of the council’s PR operation and its accessibility.
We were told that, up until recently, there was a tendency for some officers in service areas to talk independently to the press and sometimes conduct broadcast media interviews. It is positive that LMT have recognised the potential reputational risks of such a situation, and have taken steps to ensure a more corporate approach – but this needs to be followed through if some areas of the business fail to comply.

In the absence of any evaluation of the council’s media coverage and insight into how residents access their news, it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion about the importance of the council’s relationship with outlets such as the Gazette. However, local media coverage can often be the main prism through which people form perceptions about a council, so it is positive that the Mayor and chief executive meet and engage with the Gazette on a regular basis.

Research into local people’s priorities and the most effective way of communicating with them should form the basis of the council’s strategy going forward. This will allow resources and energy to be focussed on telling a positive, proactive story through targeted communications activity – and a shift away from firefighting negative media.

A major communications channel for the council currently is the quarterly loveMiddlesbrough magazine. Many people were complimentary about the publication, but in the absence of any readership survey it is again difficult for us to make a judgement. We would certainly support maintaining the magazine as a valuable means potentially of communicating directly with residents, but would encourage a review of its format, content, design and production. It was surprising to us that the magazine carries a foreword from the chief executive rather than the Mayor, and would encourage this to be changed. This would give the Mayor a platform to articulate his priorities and vision for the borough.

It was also not clear to us who produces loveMiddlesbrough. The communications team do not appear to have responsibility for the magazine, and therefore are not able to ensure its content reflects the Mayor’s vision, council priorities or key issues for the area. We would recommend this is reviewed.

There is a sense the council has enhanced its social media presence since the recruitment of new members of the team. More engaging content has been created through initiatives such as live tweeting from road gritting trucks during winter, and a greater understanding has been developed of the impact of activity more widely. However, there is a clear need for more closer working between digital and media officers to ensure that reputational issues which arise on social media are monitored and dealt with appropriately.

The council still has a plethora of different websites and social media accounts which need to be audited and rationalised. Policies and protocols around establishing a new site or account also appear to be unclear. The development of a new digital strategy is an opportunity to address these issues.

The council does not currently offer an e-bulletin service which would allow people to be informed and kept up to date about different services and issues. These have proved very effective in other parts of the country, and are a cost-effective and easily measurable way of communicating directly with residents. We would encourage this to be explored – if the data from a resident survey reveals there is a demand.
It is proposed in the draft communications strategy to establish a monthly e-newsletter for partners. Whilst keeping stakeholders informed about council activity would be a positive step, in our view more progress needs to be made to encourage genuine partnership working between the authority and other local bodies to develop a shared agenda for Middlesbrough (which we discuss in more detail in section 6.3).

The creation of the Tees Valley Combined Authority has resulted in closer and more structured working between council communications teams in the area. Colleagues we spoke to from neighbouring authorities also expressed a willingness to explore opportunities for cooperation and pooling resources for running joint campaigns.

The previous decentralised approach to communications has contributed to a proliferation of different brands across the organisation. There is a clear need to introduce corporately agreed branding guidelines which are enforced. LMT has already recognised that a rationalisation of the different brands associated with the council needs to take place, and work to audit these is underway.

Although a plethora of different council brands creates confusion amongst the public and is expensive, we were more concerned about services and initiatives which appear to have not been branded at all. Due to a widespread perception that the council has a poor reputation, deliberate decisions have been taken to disassociate Middlesbrough Council from some of its most popular initiatives.

The council has invested a large sum of money in a new sports village for Middlesbrough, which offers an impressive range of modern facilities. However, there is only a low-key association with the council on the village’s marketing materials. Similarly, the popular Orange Pip Market – established and run by the authority – has no mention of Middlesbrough Council on its website. Residents we met were dismissive of the idea that associating the market with the council would somehow diminish its popularity. In our view, the council needs to urgently do more to ensure it is associated with initiatives such as these that people clearly value.

The tendency for the council to hide its light under a bushel would appear to extend to everyday services. We were told there have been complaints made locally about the state of the roads – despite a large-scale highways investment scheme from the council. When asked why this was not better understood by residents, one interviewee told us: ‘Because we didn’t shout about it’.

Although the council understandably views the promotion of Middlesbrough the place as a priority, there remains a need to ensure residents better understand what their council tax is being spent on. For example, the council only appeared to send statutory information out with the 2017/18 bills, which would have been an opportunity to communicate investment decisions over the next year.

The abundance of different brands and the failure to associate the council with popular initiatives stem from a lack of confidence we previously identified. This is clearly starting to change, and there is now a clear need for the council to develop a more coherent identity for itself and the everyday services it provides. Although the strategic plan has recently been refreshed to 2020/21, this should be translated this into a vision which –
alongside the mayor’s priorities – can be more easily communicated and understood by a wider audience.

6.3 Place branding

There is an infectious enthusiasm across the council about how Middlesbrough as a place is changing for the better.

The ambition and energy that the leadership has for the local area was recognised by people we spoke to both inside and outside the organisation. A narrative is starting to emerge about how the council’s capital investment into the local area will result in business rate growth, which will in turn help fund local services.

The decision to engage Hemingway Design in the development of a place and destination brand is evidence of the council’s recognition of this as a priority. Much of the approach outlined in the company’s methodology is one we would recommend based on experience elsewhere, and partners we spoke to were positive about the decision to bring in external expertise.

The council has adopted a number of different brands to articulate how the area is improving – including LoveMiddlesbrough and ‘Middlesbrough is Changing’. However, a truly successful place brand is not just a logo and a strapline – it is a strong narrative that sums up the key elements of place – location, culture, history, future aspirations and community – supported by a coherent and professional visual identity.

Working more closely with partners and stakeholders will be crucial to developing a more coherent vision for Middlesbrough. Although it is appropriate for the council to take a leadership role in the development of the brand, it should have buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders outside of the authority who have a role in promoting the place. The use of third parties will also add greater strength to the brand and overall message.

Partners we spoke to were positive about the progress the leadership of the council has made in recent months to engender a more inclusive approach. However, it will be important to ensure the goodwill that has been earned with partners is harnessed going forward and not lost.

Although we appreciate the development of a brand is a work in progress over the coming months, we do believe more could be done now to ensure the council’s vision is more resident-focused. Although capital investment by its very nature relates to the construction of buildings, there is a human story which sits behind this – the creation of jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities – that also needs to be told. Putting local faces on your marketing materials about Middlesbrough would be an easy and effective quick win.

It is important a balance is struck between strong messages about investment into Middlesbrough and the reality of local people’s everyday lives. This is why the council brand remains very important. The council will clearly want to be associated with a successful visitor and investor destination project, but its own brand remains the expression of the relationship with its citizens – encapsulating the values of the organisation and reflecting leadership, accountability and ownership of local services.
This does mean recognising that, yes, the area has its problems and some residents need your support, but at the same time playing into a more positive story about how you are transforming yourself and the area to create a better future.

6.4 Role of members

The passion for Middlesbrough we found amongst officers in the council was strongly replicated with members.

There is a cross-party desire to ‘talk-up’ the place and a strong sense that some of the negative perceptions of Middlesbrough, or indeed the council, do not reflect the reality of conversations councillors have with their residents.

The Mayor is clearly well regarded by staff, and there was a strong sense that his priorities are widely recognised across the organisation. It is less clear whether that understanding extends to residents, which is the reason we would recommend the foreword to loveMiddlesbrough goes in his name.

Members value the support they have been offered to help them better communicate locally – for example through establishing community Facebook pages and planned media training. They also appreciate the advice given by the council’s media officers, who regularly attend informal cabinet meetings.

However, although there are well established links between members and the press office, relationships with the wider communications team are considerably less advanced. It is important that closer links are fostered so that communications officers have a better understanding of political priorities, and so that members appreciate the full range of communications services on offer.

Although Executive members are given access to staff internal communications channels, it would appear that communications with backbench members is poor. Although councillors still receive couriered copies of council documents to their home every week – presumably at considerable cost – there is not any specific mechanisms to keep them informed. Some backbench members told us, for example, that they had heard about the investment prospectus launch from a colleague in a neighbouring authority. This is a weakness – members can be some of the most effective advocates for the council as they tend to be highly trusted by their communities, and you have members who want to do their bit.

In addition to the communications team introducing an evaluation dashboard to ensure members (and officers) are kept up to speed with corporate activities, we would also recommend the re-introduction of a weekly briefing (by email) for all councillors on upcoming events and issues.

6.5 Internal communications

Improving staff engagement and internal communications is a clear priority for the council’s new leadership, and this was reflected in all our discussions. The interim chief executive’s personal and authentic approach to leading and engaging has made a demonstrable difference in the energy and positivity in the business.
There is a genuine sense that employee engagement has improved in recent months. People we met spoke of a more open, confident and inclusive tone and culture – and the council’s leadership deserve credit for fostering such a change in a relatively short period of time.

The improvements appear to have been largely driven by attempts to encourage more face-to-face forms of communication. For example, the quarterly staff briefings by the chief executive were regularly cited as an initiative that has proved very popular. There is clearly goodwill to build on, and this could be achieved through the development of further opportunities for staff to hear directly from senior managers (e.g. a chief executive’s weekly email or blog).

However, although the face to face briefings from the chief executive have proved popular, it was less clear to us how the council’s internal communications function is involved in shaping the messages – and ensuring that they are communicated to a wider audience.

Many council staff do not have access to email, and previous staff surveys have revealed the levels of employee engagement have varied considerably across different departments. Given that all staff do not have access to the same information, there will need to be a continued focus on targeting unengaged staff.

The council’s internal communications have been reviewed through a period of staff consultation. There is now a dedicated internal communications post within the communications team, and a strategy has been drafted. However, current activity does not appear to involve more than the dissemination of information. There is a need for the strategy to be refined – based on organisational priorities – and agreed.

A new intranet was launched around the time we were onsite, and weekly emails have also been recently introduced within departments. It will be opportune to take stock of how effective these new channels are working through research with staff.

Although staff clearly have a strong sense of pride in their jobs, we were told ‘I work for Middlesbrough Council’ is not something people are heard to say. Instead, employees tend to feel a sense of loyalty – at least in the first instance – to their service area. This could be a consequence of the lack of a corporate approach in some parts of the council, which we have highlighted elsewhere in the report. However, the lack of any organisational values is clearly a major factor.

The development of values and a people’s strategy – which builds upon other positive initiatives such as the introduction of an appraisal system and showcasing customer excellence in different departments – represents a real opportunity. It will be important for the new values to be embedded into a planned staff engagement campaign, which is properly resourced and owned by LMT.

### 7. Key recommendations

We have summarised our recommendations under three headings. The first we have labelled ‘priority recommendations’ – areas we believe the council needs to give immediate focus to in order to meet its aspirations for communications. We have then
grouped our findings into ‘**quick wins**’, essentially those matters that can and should be dealt with as soon as possible, which, if addressed will create the environment for the **medium term** recommendations to also be achieved.

**Priority recommendations**

- Develop a more coherent identity for the council and the everyday services it provides, then agree a brand for the place
- The council needs a fresh narrative to explain how it is transforming itself to improve local people’s lives
- Be clear about how the place branding project fits into the overall vision for the council – and how it will be landed, developed and integrated
- Re-introduce a resident survey – including questions about how people access information, and what they read/consume
- Ensure the council is associated with popular initiatives
- Focus energy on understanding and addressing resident priorities with targeted proactive communications – not firefighting negative media
- Develop a council-wide annual campaign plan – linked to Mayor’s vision, signed off and owned by leadership
- Centralise communications spending to ensure better value for money and more targeted and coordinated activity linked to strategic priorities
- Ensure the new organisational values are well communicated within a planned staff engagement campaign

**Quick wins**

- Re-introduce weekly email briefing for members (e.g. updated version of calendar card)
- Make local people the face of your communications and use third parties to endorse your brand
- The Marketing and Communications Manager to have a voice in decision-making e.g. attending LMT meetings
- Review the format, content and design of *loveteesmiddlesbrough* magazine
- Introduce a Mayor’s message in *loveteesmiddlesbrough* magazine
- Agree internal communications strategy
- Carry out full audit of social media accounts and websites
- Introduce a framework for monitoring and evaluating communications activity
- Much closer links between transformation, OD and communications to drive change
- Build on the success of quarterly staff briefings with more planned and evaluated opportunities to communicate and engage (e.g. CEX bulletin)
- Identify training and development needs for the communications team (e.g. membership of PRCA and LG Communications)
- Move the press team back with the wider communications team – to promote better integrated working across disciplines
- Work more closely with public sector communications teams across the Tees Valley (e.g. pooling resources for joint campaigns)

**Medium term**

- Future proof communications by ensuring the council has the right skills (e.g. behaviour change, channel shift)
• Ensure the communications team structure is fitted around a new integrated and strategic approach – right jobs, right skills and right people
• Introduce a communications evaluation dashboard to report at least monthly to LMT and Exec
• Closer links between communications and performance and partnerships teams
• Develop a e-bulletin programme for your core audiences
• Ensure residents better understand what their council tax is spent on (e.g. better communications with annual bills)

8. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate that you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the council wishes to take things forward.

As part of the communications peer review process, there is an offer of further support. I would be very happy to discuss any areas for development and improvement where the LGA can help you. Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and LGA for any wider support. His contact details are: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk 07747636910.

Yours sincerely

Matt Nicholls
Head of Communications Support
Local Government Association