

Communications Review

Birmingham City Council

February 2016

Report

1. Background and scope of the review

It was a pleasure to be invited by Birmingham City Council to deliver the recent communications review. This forms part of the wider package of support currently being provided by the Local Government Association (LGA) to Birmingham City Council.

The review work commenced in October 2015 following the appointment of the Interim Assistant Director for Communications. The Assistant Director commissioned the review whilst putting in place simultaneous improvement plans.

Communications reviews are part of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer and are delivered by peers from local government. The peers who delivered this review were:

David Holdstock, Director of Communications and Strategy, Local Government Association
Fran Collingham, Assistant Director (Communications), Coventry City Council
Jo Moynihan, Communications Officer, Coventry City Council
Matt Nicholls, Head of Local Government Communications Support, Local Government Association
Carl Welham, Communications Consultant and Interim Head of Regeneration Delivery, London Borough of Hackney

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer reviews are improvement-orientated 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 peers used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the evidence presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The scope of the review covered the following areas:

- The ability of the council's corporate communications function to meet improvements in communications set out by the Kerslake Review and the Panel
- The capacity and ability of the council to deliver effective internal communications
- The structure of the corporate communications function
- The relationship between corporate communications and key stakeholders (e.g. senior management, members, service directorates, Marketing Birmingham)
- Communications challenges facing the council
- How Birmingham residents access information about the council and how they prefer to

The review team spent a significant amount of time carrying out desktop research, and spent a total of nine days onsite with the council between us. Our work onsite included interviews with members of corporate communications, the Future Council programme team, external partners, HR and senior managers and communications staff within service directorates. We also commissioned Populus Data Solutions to establish insight into residents' views of the council's methods of communicating with local people. This report sets out our findings.

2. Overall findings

Like most local authorities, Birmingham City Council is facing significant financial challenges. But unlike others, it is also under intense government and public scrutiny following the Kerslake Review.

Better communications is key to delivering the necessary improvements identified in the Kerslake Review. Specifically it highlighted:

- The council needs a more positive narrative
- The vision hasn't been shared or understood by officers, partners and residents
- Everyone needs to understand the priorities, know what their role is in delivering them and why that is important
- The council's communications is based on a broadcast model

Our communications review found that some progress has been made since changes to the leadership of the corporate communications team, specifically on improving internal communications and staff engagement. The timely commissioning of this review by the council is also evidence that the council recognises that improvements in communications across the organisation need to be made. However, we also found a number of issues the council needs to focus on.

The opportunities are very much there. As the Panel noted in its recent letter to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the change of political leadership in the council 'offered an opportunity for a fresh start for all councillors...engaging with residents and operating in a fully transparent and accountable way'. The council's new leader has set out a vision for the council, pledging to rival the Northern Powerhouse and saying his narrative will be based around 'every child, every citizen and every place matters'. This has already received some national media coverage and is a very positive step forward for the council in terms of its narrative and starting to tell a different story about the city.

This is arguably one of the most exciting periods in Birmingham's recent history. Although it has been a turbulent period for the council, the city's reputation as a place to visit and do business is growing. National media perceptions of Birmingham are slowly starting to change and there is an increasing recognition that the city is changing.

Birmingham, as the largest local authority in Europe, should be a top draw for UK communications professionals. Its communications service and staff should be able to proactively manage the council's reputation internally, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

We found some examples of good practice in Birmingham. In recent weeks, the council has adopted a more proactive approach to external communications while the work undertaken to improve its internal communications, including best practice workshops and development of an internal communications and engagement plan, is evidence of real progress. In addition, some of the 'quick wins' identified in this report are already being progressed and having a positive impact.

However, overall, the communications service and corporate approach to communications is still fragmented. The communications service is generally under-valued and demoralised and until recently, it has lacked leadership and strategic purpose. The result is a model and way of working which, in our view, will not support the council's change programme and future ambitions of the council.

The local, regional and national media spotlight on the council means that the corporate communications team is reactive. This is to the detriment of planning for major initiatives. Communications activity is not underpinned by any sense of priorities. The development of the Forward Together 2020 Vision provides an opportunity to address this, linking corporate priorities to communication priorities.

Internal communications is a significant concern. This is borne out by the results of the most recent staff survey, which revealed only 27 per cent of staff felt the council was good at engaging employees in decision making, 39 per cent thought senior managers were sufficiently visible and accessible – and only a third understood how the Future Council programme impacted on them and their team.

Although the new Leader has set out his vision for the city, there is a lack of a clear narrative about the council, its future and the role staff can play in its improvement journey. Worryingly, staff surveys reveal a distinct lack of trust. An overhaul of internal communications is required to help create a more open and transparent culture.

The current fragmented model for delivering the council's communications needs to be addressed. There are a variety of models and activity within directorates with little corporate oversight over most of this activity. As well as a lack of strategic approach to communications, this is not cost-effective.

Work is underway to develop a compelling and engaging vision for the council, which is both positive and crucial to telling a cohesive and compelling story about the city. There are many positive stories to tell, such as the regeneration of the city centre and improvements in key services. However, without tackling the many structural and cultural issues hampering the delivery of good, strategic communications, we are concerned these positive stories will remain largely untold.

Getting the permanent appointment right for the new Assistant Director is crucial for addressing the challenges identified in this report. The council should aspire to have a communications service with a national profile for excellence that is the envy of colleagues in other local authorities who then compete to work in Birmingham.

3. The corporate communications function

The central, corporate communications team is effectively split into two – the marketing function, and the Press and PR section (which also carries out internal communications and produces the residents' newsletter Forward).

The two teams sit separately from each other, and this appears to be indicative of a wider gulf that has developed between them over some time. Both seem to work to their own priorities and there does not appear to be a culture of meaningful, coordinated planning that we would expect to see from a modern corporate communications service.

Progress to create a more cohesive function have been made by the Interim Assistant Director for Communications. The department's managers now sit together in the same office, and the Head of Public Affairs has moved into the corporate communications team. This, along with initiatives such as a forward planner for the department, has started to engender a more joined-up approach to communications.

Individuals within the corporate team are well-regarded by external partners and internal colleagues. Many have worked for the council for some time, and have developed a reputation for a strong understanding of both the council and the city. However, the corporate team has suffered from a historic lack of leadership. A silo approach has developed over many years, resulting in the uncoordinated approach detailed above. There also appears to be an inward-facing culture, which means the team lacks the outward facing confidence we would expect to see.

The corporate team has produced monthly reports, which provide a breakdown of activity including media coverage and campaign updates. However, we were told these reports – which take a considerable time to compile – were not sent to anyone apart from the previous Head of Corporate Communications. This means the wider organisation has not fully understood the work the team has done or given them any credit where there have been successes. These are now being shared more widely.

Added to a silo approach to communications across the organisation, we found that there is little strategic basis for determining communications priorities and activity.

3.1 Press and PR

The Press and PR team has a good reputation amongst many internal and external stakeholders. If a reputational issue is about to blow up in the media, the team is trusted to provide sound advice and counsel.

The team has coordinated the council's response to a number of high profile stories in recent years. It should be acknowledged that many of these individual issues, the most recent example being the budget announcement in December 2015, have largely been a success in communications terms. Whilst many people we spoke to were complimentary about how these sensitive issues had been handled, a reactive culture has undoubtedly developed. There is a sense that the team is always waiting for the next media issue rather than proactively 'setting the agenda.'

We were told the volume of media enquiries has decreased since the height of 'Trojan Horse'. However, analysis of media coverage in November 2015 revealed that just 5.7 per cent was positive (85.6 per cent was neutral and 8.7 per cent was negative). Given the positive opportunities presented by the regeneration of Birmingham city centre, now would be a good time for the council to adopt a more proactive approach.

There have been attempts, particularly with the local media, to be more proactive to ensure the council's important role in projects such as Grand Central and the redevelopment of New Street station is recognised. However, the city is not yet 'punching at its weight'.

Perceptions of the council and the city will not completely change overnight, as they have developed over many years. However, with a strategy and different approach, there is now a great opportunity to adopt a fresh approach to communicating externally.

We also found a reactive, insular culture within Birmingham's communications. This would appear to be a consequence of an entrenched corporate culture rather than specifically the fault of the communications team itself. However, it appears to have taken a hold on their day-to-day activity and approach.

The team does not seek out opportunities to learn, train or network. We were told by members of the team that some staff are generally underqualified, lack vision and do not have the necessary tactical or strategic expertise. They are rarely represented at regional or national events for local government communicators. A lack of time is cited as the reason for this. It is important for Birmingham's reputation, particularly if it wants to attract talented communicators from within the sector to work there, that a more outward facing approach is adopted.

Although time pressures, largely a result of the number of reactive media enquiries received, have been cited as a reason for not networking and meeting external partners, we were also told by both junior and senior members of the team that they feel under-utilised. This would appear to be a result of the historic lack of leadership within corporate communications, and the workload and productivity of many members of the team not properly managed. This is now changing under the interim head of communications and we have started to see some positive results from this approach.

The press officers work closely with individual cabinet members, and this relationship is highly valued by the team. However, this results in news stories being promoted which serve the interest of portfolio areas rather than wider corporate priorities. It feels like a passive and reactive service, rather than PR activity which supports the council's overall reputation. We were told individual cabinet members have the final say on key media messages – often without reference to each other, the Leader or senior management. This fragmented approach further impacts on a lack of clarity about priorities.

Like many other councils, we were told that councillors still place a very heavy importance on the role of the local media (despite declining circulations). Our research in Section 5 of this report shows residents prefer a range of different sources for accessing information about the council. This means that the media should be seen as one channel amongst many.

However, the media is still the main prism through which the improvement journey of the council will be seen by many people. A more positive, proactive approach across a range of different media outlets will be vital to ensuring this story is heard. A good example of where this has worked well is recent national media coverage setting out the Leader's vision for the city.

Although it is important for the council to work alongside media such as the Birmingham Mail, to promote the city, a broader strategy of targeting the national and trade press needs to be adopted. Many people we spoke to in the council agreed with this approach and again, work has started to develop a wider 'palette' of media outlets.

The council has successfully positioned itself in the national media as an area adversely affected by the impact of spending cuts in local government. Its role in driving economic growth in the city and region is a story that is less well known. A strategy of ensuring Birmingham's improvement journey is understood and reported in the trade press would also help position the authority as an attractive place to work in local government.

The press team is also responsible for some of the council's corporate social media accounts. Evaluating the council's social media presence was outside the scope of our work, and we would recommend a separate piece of work is commissioned to undertake this. However, we were struck by the plethora of Twitter, Facebook and other accounts that seem to exist in the council. Again, this adds to the overall lack of clarity about messaging and priorities. The council needs to fully audit all of its social media presence and develop an overall social media strategy, linked to the council's communications strategy.

Members of the press team are proud of the Birmingham Newsroom website, which is primarily an online resource for journalists. It is a very thorough site, containing an impressive amount of news and information about the council. From the perspective of a journalist, it is clearly a useful tool. However, we were told the site was set up because of technical and content management issues with the corporate website, which is controlled by Customer Services. This is not a sound or informed basis for separating news about the council from the corporate website.

3.2 Internal communications

We found little corporate ownership or oversight of internal communications. Resources and people are spread across directorates and there are separate internal communications programmes for Future Council and the corporate communications team. There does not appear to be any central oversight of all the channels being used to ensure consistent messaging or coordination of information going out.

The corporate internal communications function is well resourced in terms of overall staff numbers. It is efficient at channel management and adept at sending timely information to the wider organisation. However, it does not appear to have any strategic input into important corporate initiatives.

In practical terms, internal communications across the organisation appears fragmented with limited corporate ownership or oversight of all activity. Wider internal communications resources (people) are spread across the organisation, working in directorates or on specific programmes. This means that internal communications appears to be delivered by several functions.

In our view, there need to be more opportunities to encourage staff engagement and honest conversations (face-to-face or digital) across all levels of the organisation. We found examples where two way conversations appear to be actively discouraged – reinforcing the perception of the council as broadcaster. An example of this that was provided to us is the statement in bold and red on all corporate emails, which (intentionally or not) actively discourages engagement:

Please don't reply to this message. It's from an account for sending global emails to Birmingham City Council employees, and isn't monitored for incoming mail.

Internal communications staff appear to see themselves as channel managers – delivering large amounts of information to employees on a regular basis. But there is limited evaluation of the channels staff currently use (or want to use) to get information about the council. Furthermore, there is a clear perception that communications tools commonly used in large organisations (for example staff intranet or Yammer) are either regarded as not fit for purpose, not understood or used effectively.

Staff do not have one 'go to' place to get information which will help them keep up to date with news from the organisation, partners or city (news they can use) – or details about policies and processes (tools to help them do their job). Staff seem unclear about where to go to for specific information, and systems are not integrated so that staff can access information from one platform.

The council needs to improve internal communications across the organisation in order to rebuild trust and raise morale amongst staff who – potentially – can be the organisation's most powerful advocates. Strategic actions identified in this report can help the council to refocus the service and help move the council from being seen as a broadcaster of information to an organisation which effectively engages staff.

In local government internal communications tends to sit within the main communications team, but will usually have close links with HR and transformation/organisational development teams and close relationships with senior leaders – particularly the chief executive and directors in directorates.

Work is already well underway to improve internal communications and engagement. A number of workshops have already been held and progress is being made on developing an internal communications strategy.

Corporate

Internal communications sits within the corporate team and is managed by the Head of Press, PR and Communications. Three members of the team work directly on internal communications – two communication officers and one manager. They currently also produce the council's residents' newsletter , Forward.

The team manages the council's corporate internal communication channels. These are:

- Your weekly news – a weekly e-newsletter sent to around 12,000 staff who have access to e-mail
- Inner Voice – a bi-monthly e-magazine produced using WordPress
- Managers' Bulletin – an ad hoc update for managers
- Emails sent to all staff from the communications inbox
- Desktop advertising banner – one per month

The only channel the team is able to evaluate is Inner Voice. This is because Outlook does not produce any evaluation measures.

The team does not manage the content on the intranet – Inline. Inline itself is not updated and not well-regarded by staff. The site is managed by customer services, who also have responsibility for the council's website. Most of their focus appears to be on the external website rather than the intranet. It is difficult to obtain monitoring statistics around usage of the intranet and key metrics such as the most popular pages – so any detailed analysis to provide useful information on page views and links accessed is not available to the team to help inform and plan their work.

Transformation

Future Council is supported by a communications manager seconded from the corporate team and the Head of Marketing, who is overseeing internal and external communication on the programme.

The Future Council programme makes use of all the corporate internal communication channels and those managed by others across the council, including:

- News items, pages and banner adverts on People Solutions
- Future Council section on Inline (intranet)
- Future Council section on Birmingham Newsroom
- Directorate newsletters and briefings
- Yammer

The Future Council communications team also supports the programme's engagement and for this a variety of methods, mainly led by HR, are used:

- Big Conversation
- Marketplace
- Managers' voice
- JNC briefings
- Forward Champions

Directorate and service communications

There are also internal newsletters/briefings produced independently of the Corporate Communications Team. These include:

- Weekly internal recruitment email sent to all staff
- ICT messages sent to all staff
- People Directorate weekly round-up
- Learning and Development bulletin (People)
- Corporate Landlord monthly bulletin
- Economy monthly briefing
- Weekly school noticeboard

What do staff think of communication?

The recent staff survey found that:

- 55.9% of staff have a clear understanding of the Council's vision
- 33.8% understand how the Future Council programme impacts on me and my team
- 87.4% aware of the Future Council programme
- 27.3% said the Council is good at engaging employees in decision making
- 39.1% said the senior managers are sufficiently visible and accessible to staff of all levels

When asked what does the Council need to do more of to develop staff engagement, the most common themes were:

- Listen
- Communicate
- Involve staff in changes
- Recognise and value work

Focus groups also identified a lack of trust across the organisation, the need for a better employee voice and a stronger strategic narrative. The general feedback we received was that internal communications needs to improve and help facilitate a more open and transparent culture. This includes ensuring regular feedback, the council is seen to do what it says it will and that the language and tone of communications reflects that.

3.3 Marketing

The corporate communications function contains a well-resourced marketing and design function. It runs and supports some major council-wide campaigns and initiatives, many of which are well regarded. Two recent examples include 'Super September' – which included the Rugby World Cup games at Villa Park, the reopening of New St station and Grand Central – and 'Cleaner, Greener Streets', a three-year city-wide campaign.

Although we found some evidence of the marketing team providing good support to corporate priorities – such as the recent budget consultation – it appears to mainly serve the requirements of individual service directorates. This is largely a passive relationship, with directorates coming to communications with requests and often expecting them to be met without question.

A silo approach to campaigns means the marketing team has limited opportunities to have a say on driving campaigns that will positively affect the reputation of the council as a whole. This partly stems from a historic lack of faith in the ability of the team to add value. We were told corporate communications has developed a reputation for being the people that 'just say no' and are not seen as taking a solution-driven approach.

A way of working has developed whereby directorates feel they receive a poor or obstructive service from corporate communications, and the marketing team consider their professional advice to be ignored. The marketing team also spends a considerable amount of time 'policing' the council's corporate brand against attempts by directorates to create their own separate identities.

Going forward, a situation needs to be created where the corporate communication function is valued and respected. It must be able to demonstrate expertise in managing and delivering excellent, impactful content across a range of channels.

4. Relations between corporate communications and stakeholders

This review primarily focussed on the corporate communications function and did not examine the effectiveness of separate communications activity within the council's service directorates. However, the relationships between the corporate team and directorates are of fundamental importance to improving communications in the council – as is the relationship with Marketing Birmingham.

4.1 Service directorates

Birmingham's approach to communications has evolved in an ad hoc way over time, with no strategic oversight. As a consequence of the often poor relationship between directorates and the corporate communications team has been the growth of dedicated communications resources within service directorates.

Although media relations remains the responsibility of the corporate centre, there is a raft of marketing and internal communications activity going on in other parts of the organisation. There would also appear to be a lack of clarity about exactly how much resource is dedicated as a whole in the council to communications.

Within one directorate alone, there are at least six people working on communications. As stated earlier, there could be a case for some dedicated communications resource within directorates given their size and the issues they face. This could be based around a 'hub and spoke' model with staff reporting into the head of communications. However, this needs strategic oversight and before making that decision, we would recommend the council undertakes a full audit of communications activity and spend across the whole organisation. Given the financial pressures the council is facing, it will provide a proper understanding about how much is being spent on communications. A decision about the most effective structure can be informed by that information.

Many councils centralise all their communications activity, whilst some have a devolved model, reporting in to the central team. Although in principle we would favour a centralised approach – to ensure consistency and coordination of activity, and value for money – we recognise that for a council the size of Birmingham there may be a case for a different model. We would be happy to undertake further support work in this area.

As set out earlier, there is often an expectation on the part of directorates that the marketing team will simply process requests for campaign materials (this is in contrast to the relationship with the press team, whose professional advice is respected and listened to). If the marketing team does say 'no', this is usually escalated to a senior service manager who uses their seniority to overrule the decision. On other occasions, directorates totally bypass corporate communications and commission work externally.

An example cited to us many times was the commissioning of a supplement in the Guardian. Intended to attract people to the city to work in children's services, it cost in the region of £75,000. Although we would not necessarily disagree in principle with the merits of doing this (or something similar) as part of a wider campaign, it was apparently commissioned without any prior knowledge of the corporate communications team. This kind of disconnect is not healthy or effective. We asked what success measures were in place to determine the effectiveness of the supplement, and were told there had been lots of positive verbal feedback. This is not a scientific way of measuring the success of such a piece of activity.

There also appears to be little adherence to website protocols, which means a number of teams have set up their own micro sites. The growth of these sites stems from a frustration, expressed to us by many people, with the council's website. As part of the wider digital strategy, we would advise developing a strategy for improving the website rather than finding 'work arounds'. In the meantime, we would recommend an audit of how many sites the council operates.

A situation needs to be reached where, at the very least, information is being shared between different parts of the organisation – and a culture of mutual trust is encouraged.

4.2 Marketing Birmingham

Marketing Birmingham and the council should be two sides of the same coin. However, despite the growing success of the city, it would appear some relationships between communications counterparts at the two organisations have often been difficult. This was raised frequently with us by people we met during our interviews. There appears to be a level of mistrust on both sides, with many people within the authority of the view that Marketing Birmingham has been seen to try and take disproportionate credit for the city's regeneration.

At the root of the issue appears to be a lack of consistent joint planning and coordination. Despite the strategic importance of the council's relationship with Marketing Birmingham, we were told that meetings between the two organisations are sporadic and often cancelled at the last minute. Beyond the Service Level Agreement and meetings of the Board, there appears to be little strategic planning of joint priorities and operational discussions about which organisation is going to take the lead on specific issues.

As there has not been a consistent culture of coordinated planning between the organisations, information has often not been shared and mutual suspicions have subsequently developed. We were told of frequent attempts by both sides to set up regular meetings to plan more effectively, but that these are apparently often cancelled due to other commitments.

Marketing Birmingham claims the council is central to its narrative about the city. The decision by the authority to build the ICC and the NEC are used as examples of where it has intervened to support the region's economy and development.

There appears to be some difference of opinion about what the priorities for Marketing Birmingham should be. Whilst the council is thought to place an emphasis on the visitor economy, Marketing Birmingham sees itself more focussed on investment and growth – which reflects its wider role in the region for the Local Enterprise Partnership.

The lack of coordination between the organisations appears to be symptomatic of the fragmentation of communications within the council. Different parts of the authority approach Marketing Birmingham about particular issues, and often do not inform the corporate communications team.

Projects to promote the city appear to originate from one organisation without proper consultation and discussion with the other. As examples, the '15 in 15' list drawn up by Marketing Birmingham to promote reasons to visit the city in 2015 was apparently placed in the media without any prior notification to the council's communications team.

Although there is scope for closer working on the delivery of day-to-day activity, there also appears to be more concerning gaps in the sharing of information around planning for major events.

The systems and structures for ensuring a smooth and effective working relationship are not in place. There is a need for a clearer definition of each organisation's part in the task of promoting Birmingham. An over-arching destination plan, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, would go some way.

Marketing Birmingham's website states that it is 'the driving force behind the city's growing reputation as a place to visit, meet and invest'. In our view, the council should be positioning itself behind such claims – or at least part of a partnership delivering such improvement.

Much good work has been done in recent months to associate the council more closely with the regeneration of the city centre but going forward, this work needs to be more strategic and joined-up.

The LEP conducted extensive research towards the end of 2015 about the West Midlands, and the attitudes people living in and outside the area have towards it. This should give both the council and Marketing Birmingham a rich source of insight to jointly develop a shared narrative for the city and destination plan.

The council is reducing its funding to Marketing Birmingham in 2016/17. This will change the nature of the relationship, and it also provides an opportunity to set out more clearly a set of agreed priorities. It does not necessarily matter which organisation takes the lead on particular issues, but it does need to be understood and strategically planned. The West Midlands Combined Authority will change the relationship and the wider landscape further.

5. How the council communicates with residents

We commissioned Populus Data Solutions to conduct polling into resident views of the council's methods of communicating with local people.

It is important for all councils to understand how their residents access and prefer to access information otherwise there is a risk information simply doesn't reach the intended audience. In Birmingham's case, we were told of a variety of different opinions about what the priority channels the council should be targeting. Some members and key stakeholders believe the most important outlets remain the Birmingham Mail and Post and local political blogs, the corporate communications team places a heavy emphasis on its own Birmingham Newsroom site and others favour targeting online news resources.

In December 2015, a statistically random sample of 521 Birmingham residents was polled by telephone on our behalf as part of this work. The questions focused predominantly on the council's communications channels and residents' preferences for finding out about the council and the services it provides.

More than half of Birmingham's respondents (55 per cent) said that their council keeps residents 'very well informed' or 'fairly well informed' about the services and benefits it provides. This is lower than that the national result (63 per cent). There were no significant differences in feeling informed/uninformed on the basis of gender, age, social grade or ethnicity.

Overall, how well informed do you think Birmingham City Council keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?		
	December 2015	September 2015
	Birmingham	GB
	%	%
Very or fairly well informed	55	63
Very well informed	9	16
Fairly well informed	46	47
Not very well informed	26	26
Not well informed at all	18	10
Don't know	1	1

Base (all respondents): Birmingham: 521; GB: 1009

Six in ten respondents stated that they trust their council 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' (60 per cent); this is less than the national figure (which stands at 65 per cent), but not an unbridgeable gap. Again, there were no significant differences in levels of trust on the basis of gender, age, social grade or ethnicity.

How much do you trust Birmingham City Council?		
	December 2015	September 2015
	Birmingham	GB
	%	%
A great deal or fair amount	60	64
A great deal	7	9
A fair amount	53	55
Not very much	26	25
Not at all	12	9
Don't know	2	1

Base (all respondents): Birmingham: 521; GB: 1009

The 197 Birmingham respondents who said that they did not trust their local council very much or at all were asked to briefly explain why they gave that answer.

Please can you briefly explain why you gave this answer?	
	Dec 2015
	%
Council do not do what residents require / do not care / do not listen to residents	20
Poor / lack of communication / do not keep me informed / get back to me	20
They do a poor job / are inefficient / disorganised	12
Poor refuse / recycling collection scheme / late collection / leave mess / dislike wheelie bin	11
Mismanagement of funds / spending money on the wrong things / they waste money	11
Broken promises / do not do what they say they will	10
Housing issues / lack of housing / poor quality	7
Have made cuts to services / lack of services / public services / not providing what is necessary	7
Area is untidy / unclean / pavements / roads are dirty / litter / fly tipping	5
Unresponsive / slow to deal with issues / take a long time to do anything	5
I have had poor experience with the council	5
Poor customer service / unhelpful	4
Difficult to contact / hard to get through to the correct person / you need to speak to	4
Tax / unhappy with taxation / unfair council tax	4
Poor provision of services for the disabled	3
Council members are self-serving	3
Make poor decisions	3
Dishonesty / council / council members are untrustworthy	3
Poor provision of benefits / people who require benefits do not receive them	2
I don't trust anybody	2
Poor provision of child services	2
Lack of staff / they have cut staffing levels / too low	2
Bad press / heard bad things / poor reputation / bad image	2
Vermin / there is a problem with vermin / infestation	2
Issues with crime / lack of / poor policing	2
Issues surrounding education / schools	2
Standards have fallen	1
Poorly paid staff / low wages / had their wages cut	1
High wages / overpaid staff	1
Unhappy with charges / penalties I have to pay	1
Issues with immigration / asylum seekers / refugees	1
Unequal pay	1
Poor value for money	1
They're Labour / dislike Labour	1
Poor provision of street lighting	1
Poor transport infrastructure / layout / maintenance of roads / potholes	1
Other answers	5
Nothing/ Don't know	3

Base (all respondents that do not trust Birmingham Council): 197

When asked how they currently find out information about the council and the services it provides, two-thirds of respondents (66 per cent) said they used word of mouth, 63 per cent said they did so via local media and 60 per cent used printed information provided by the council.

Respondents were also asked how they would prefer to find out information about the council and its services.

And from which one of these sources of information would you PREFER to find out about Birmingham City Council and the services it provides?	
	Dec 2015
	%
Printed information provided by the council (e.g. leaflets, flyers, public notices)	23
Local media (e.g. newspapers, TV, radio, news website)	15
Council website	14
Council texts, emails and e-newsletters	11
Forward (the council's newspaper, produced twice a year)	7
Direct contact with the council (e.g. contact with staff, public meetings and events)	6
Word of mouth (e.g. friends, neighbours, relations)	6
Council social media sites (e.g. Twitter, YouTube etc.)	6
Birmingham Updates	4
From your local councillor	4
Local blogs, forums or websites (e.g. Chamberlain Files, News in Brum)	1
The council's Birmingham Newsroom website	1
Other	*
Do not find out any information	1
Don't know	1

Base (all respondents): 521

The responses to this question indicate Birmingham residents prefer a variety of different channels to find out information about the council. The council's Research Team has a rich resource of insight, broken down on a ward by ward basis, about the most effective channels for targeting different types of residents. We would recommend more use is made of this data and an approach is adopted of providing residents with information in the way they wish to receive it, rather than the way the council thinks it should be provided.

Interestingly, there was virtually no appetite amongst residents to receive information through the council's Birmingham Newsroom site and blogs such as the Chamberlain Files (both were preferred by one per cent of respondents). Although local media was the second most favoured source (15 per cent), it is worth considering that 62 per cent of respondents in total cited different channels run by the council itself (printed information, websites, texts, emails, e-newsletters, Forward and social media).

Residents were also asked how they preferred to find out information about the local area and local issues. Again, printed information provided by the council (for example, leaflets, flyers and notices) was the most popular response.

And from which one of these sources of information would you PREFER to find out about the local area and local issues?	
	Dec 2015
	%
Printed information provided by the council (e.g. leaflets, flyers and notices)	21
Local TV and radio	11
Council website	11
Local newspapers	9
Council social media sites (e.g. Twitter or Facebook)	7
Direct contact with the council (e.g. contact with staff, public meetings and events)	7
Forward (the council's newspaper, produced twice a year)	7
Word of mouth (e.g. friends, neighbours, relations)	6
Council texts, emails and e-newsletters	5
Birmingham Updates	5
National TV and radio	3
Contact with council staff or councillors	2
Advertising on billboards/buses etc.	2
Public meetings and events	2
Online community forums and blogs	1
Tenants/residents associations	*
Council noticeboards in council buildings	-
Other	*
Do get/want information about local area	1
Don't know	1

Base (all respondents): 521

Of those who cited the local media as their preferred method of finding out information about both the council and the local area, the Birmingham Mail was the most popular newspaper and Net TV and Radio the favoured broadcast outlets.

The different ways in which Birmingham residents access information about the council and the local area is reflective of trends across the country. It is important the council – like all other local authorities – develops communications strategies which provide timely information to people when they want it, in the way they want it.

Going forward, we would recommend closer working relations between the council's communications and research teams. This will help ensure communications activity is underpinned by insight about the local population.

6. What does good communications look like?

We thought it would be helpful to the council, as it seeks to improve its communications function, to set out what is seen to represent good practice in this area – in order to provide a clear focus for its improvement efforts. This is based on the LGA's work with other councils and organisations. Our action plan for how Birmingham can meet these standards is set out in **Appendix A**.

Key to this is the importance of placing strategic communications at the heart of the organisation firstly and foremost as being about supporting the delivery of a council's strategic objectives and priorities – achieving what is contained in the corporate plan.

Why is good communications important?

Good communications can help to:

- Articulate the ambition for the city
- Improve corporate and place reputation
- Support good political and managerial leadership
- Help engagement – residents, partners and staff
- Build trust
- Rally advocates
- Drive change and can deliver savings
- Attract investment (and good people) into Birmingham
- Can be used to manage performance

The approach to good communications

The following summarises the most effective approach to delivering effective, cost-effective communications:

- Leadership – clarity of purpose and commitment
- Brand (values and trust) – what does Birmingham stand for?
- A clear vision for Birmingham
- The narrative and vision must be authentic – Do people believe it and 'buy into it'?
- Strategic approach to communications with a clear corporate communications strategy
- A corporately agreed, fully evaluated annual communications plan
- All communications activity based on research and insight
- All campaigns to be linked to corporate priorities and resourced accordingly
- Evaluation in place for all communications activity
- Ensure communications is owned by everyone in the organisation

What good looks like for internal communications

The Government Communication Service's modern communications operating model says an internal communications function should:

- Be responsible for campaigns that encourage engagement across the organisation, connect people and promote collaboration
- Align internal communications campaigns/activity to organisational goals and external campaigns
- Raise understanding of how the organisation is transforming
- Support behaviour change so staff can deliver services effectively
- Manage and explore a range of communications channels so colleagues have the opportunity to have their views heard and responded to, and to ensure coherent corporate branding and messaging.