

GMCA: Towards a democratic powerhouse

Greater Manchester's councils are no strangers to working together – the 10 local authorities that make up the region (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan) have worked informally across traditional boundaries for years, to be as effective as possible on the issues that matter to everyone.

This relationship was formalised with the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2011, through which the area is working to achieve its key objective of becoming a prosperous, self-reliant city-region by 2020. The region is trailblazing the devolution concept, and others looking to follow in their footsteps are watching and learning from their journey.

The challenge for this diverse place, which is home to more than 2.7 million people and represented by 644 councillors, is to move from working together behind the scenes towards a public, democratic powerhouse. Good consultation and engagement is essential if GMCA is to turn the devolution process into something local people feel a part of, and regard as a success.

In May 2017, the region elects its first mayor. This is a major milestone. Greater Manchester has to take residents, staff and elected councillors on a journey: raising awareness, and building trust and motivation in this new democratic system which promises more localised powers and regional prosperity.

GMCA's pilot began by exploring the current awareness, attitude and engagement levels amongst staff and elected councillors. Understanding this provided GMCA with a baseline from which they could build engagement and communications as well as offering insight into the type of support, tools and information that each stakeholder group would find useful in engaging residents about devolution.

An online survey was cascaded through the ten local authorities and this was supplemented with in-depth interviews with councillors and senior officers. This, and other local evidence, demonstrated the need for investment in engagement of staff and other stakeholders. With the creation of a new body, relationships and responsibilities for explaining and advocating for GMCA are developing. There's little doubt that engagement and communication should be tailored and adapted for the different audiences across the GMCA region. In the meantime there's an overarching human narrative that needs to be developed and built upon by the GMCA and the local authorities.

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Several strands of work are now underway to address this. Firstly, there's the refreshment of the engagement and consultation framework. Secondly, there's a brand development project and thirdly, the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a communications task and finish group, which reports back with its recommendations early in 2017. Each of these are playing a valuable role in shaping the GMCA's story, making it real for everyone.

Meanwhile there was a pressing need to provide the basics for staff and stakeholders, so they feel able to become ambassadors for the GMCA, and devolution, and are able to articulate what this means to residents across the region.

The pilot identified a significant opportunity to work with councillors and support them in their role moving forwards. The research showed there is a real appetite and positivity among councillors to know and understand more, which can be built on. The challenge is to equip councillors to talk with confidence about devolution and what this means for Greater Manchester, and the people living and working in the region.

Working with GMCA officers, councillors and members of the communications task and finish group, a resource pack for councillors was developed to assist them in engaging residents and communicating the core messages about devolution for Greater Manchester. The idea was that the pack distilled the devolution idea in ways that people could explain it to friends and family.

The resource pack includes:

- Three infographics explaining the structural and political changes, and the timeline
- A short strategic communications document including message-house and Q&A
- Prompt cards and an accompanying slide deck for a ten-minute speech
- A series of two-side leaflets, aimed at different readers: 'What GMCA means for you as...'

The pack is being developed and given to councillors, to be rolled out and explained in first six months of 2017, in the run-up to the election of the new mayor.

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