



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

STRATEGY

Oldham Council

Sharpening the corporate narrative

Although Oldham's 'Co-operative Council' story had been in place for several years, our private residents' polling and other evidence suggested that not everyone had fully understood that narrative. This case study forms part of our corporate narrative resource.

Head of Communications, Carl Marsden, explains how the Oldham Council evaluated the strength of their story and sought inspiration from social media to explain what co-operation was really all about.

The challenge

We have been using our Co-operative Council strapline in Oldham since 2011 to illustrate that we are a council that works closely with residents, partners and our wider communities to make Oldham the very best place it can be. We value collaboration, mutual respect and joint working and are committed to overcoming challenges by using expertise from within our organisation and outside of it. This spirit of co-operation is absolutely fundamental to the way we do business, but we knew that some residents didn't fully understand what being a 'co-operative council' actually meant. Within the council we were very clear that co-operation was about everyone doing their bit, so that everyone benefits. But we knew we had to find a simpler, more memorable way of explaining that to residents - without compromising all the good work already done - to create a strapline that was more readily recognised and understood by our communities and partners.

The solution

With the support of our corporate and political leadership we started reviewing the language that we had been using to tell our co-operative council story. We thought about how we would summarise that story to someone in a pub or a coffee shop to help us think about using language that explained our vision of cooperation in the simplest possible language.



People-centred councils
driving social innovation
putting people first

E: comms@councils.coop | T: [@CoopInnovation](https://www.coopinnovation.co.uk) | W: councils.coop

We took the view that if we couldn't explain what we were doing in a simple sentence then we hadn't told the story effectively enough and couldn't expect residents to understand or act upon it.

We also started looking at the way people communicate big ideas through social media, when you have limited characters to articulate your point. This style of communication forces you to focus on the crux of the point you are trying to make by denying you the space to overcomplicate your message with flowery language.

Inspired by this way of thinking we were able to distil our central co-operative council message into a very basic formula, which is: #our bit #your bit #result.

To explain:

#ourbit is what Oldham Council is doing or contributing to help improve something

#yourbit is how local people, businesses and partners are helping to make change happen

And the #result is how we are all benefiting from working together

What that means is that we'll achieve better results for Oldham if everyone plays their part.

As a council we will commit to doing something - for example, investing in an area or supplying extra recycling bins - and ask residents to do your bit to help, like supporting new businesses in that area or recycling more. If we both play our part then we'll be able to achieve our objectives and fulfil the promises and shared aspirations for the place in our corporate plan.

We decided to use hashtags in our story as they work across all channels. We also wanted something that people could easily remember and that would help us to create a direct dialogue with our residents. Telling our corporate narrative through this very simple formula has also helped us to focus on making sure that when we explain what we are doing as a council, or what we need our communities to do to help. We focus on articulating the role that we will both play in achieving the result.

Although we've only recently repositioned and launched this reshaped narrative, we've already done a lot to promote it across the organisation. Senior people have promoted it through their blog posts and staff briefing days. We have deployed the #ourbit #yourbit #result messaging across our digital signage and done a desk drop to all staff that includes a checklist helping them to discuss and identify the #ourbit #yourbit messages for their own service areas and help to embed the narrative.

The impact

This revised narrative is not only helping us to explain our cooperative council strapline in a clearer, more engaging way, it is also making us more disciplined as a council when it comes to communicating with residents. The formula forces us to clarify exactly what we are doing alongside the expectation we have of our communities.



People-centred councils
driving social innovation
putting people first

E: comms@councils.coop | T: [@CoopInnovation](https://www.coopinnovation.co.uk) | W: [councils.coop](https://www.councils.coop)

It's only by both playing our part that we will achieve a result. This helps residents to understand the work of the council better, improves our transparency and explains more clearly why their involvement is equally important. With budgets tightened and councils needing residents to do more and more for themselves, we want to make sure that people don't feel as if they are being asked to undertake lots of activity with no reward or clarity on what impact their help will have. This formula makes that much clearer for communities, and shows our staff and partners how the organisation is working with residents to bring about positive change.

The formula has also helped us to identify gaps in our resident communication. As a result of this work we have now developed 'Welcome to Oldham' packs for new residents and businesses moving into the area to explain what the co-operative council is and how we can best work together to improve things. We realised that we were missing a perfect opportunity to engage residents in this new way of working from the minute they arrive here, so this explains #ourbit #yourbit #result from the off.

Why it worked / how we're sustaining it

Now we've launched the initial phase of the revised narrative we are going to be developing and sharing regular examples of how the #ourbit #yourbit #result narrative is working.

For example, we have established a new Independent Quarter in Oldham town centre which we've been transforming into a more vibrant and attractive space for residents, businesses and visitors:

#ourbit has been investing in that area and committing a £1million funding pot to it through measures like Building Improvement Grants.

#yourbit is existing businesses improving their offer and new ones investing in the area – plus the active support and footfall of local residents.

The #result has been securing more than 40 new businesses coming to the area investing more than £1million in private money and creating more than 200 new jobs.

We're working on a range of stories like that to show how this co-operative approach is bringing real results to the area. We will be making sure that the examples are fully aligned to the priorities set out in our corporate plan and are responsive to the issues that residents raise through our reputation surveys. We'll also be including questions about the narrative in these to evaluate how successful we are at improving resident understanding of the cooperative council and the redefined narrative.

We're going to be promoting the #ourbit #yourbit #result messaging through all of our communication channels, even including when residents undertake transactions on our website. When people visit it to report an issue or pay the council tax online, it will be explained how they are fulfilling #yourbit by their actions.



People-centred councils
driving social innovation
putting people first

E: comms@councils.coop | T: [@CoopInnovation](https://www.coopinnovation.co.uk) | W: [councils.coop](https://www.councils.coop)

Lessons learned

The importance of simplicity has been absolutely vital to this work. A full corporate narrative will always be important but if you don't have a sentence that summarises what your organisation is and how it operates it will be very difficult to engage residents in your activities. We need resident involvement more than ever, but our communities all have busy lives so we need to make sure we're explaining what they need to do simply and clearly and in a way that helps people to understand the benefits that working alongside the council brings to them and the area where they live and work. We've also had great support for this new approach from our senior teams and our staff, who are so vital in explaining and demonstrating this approach with our partners and wider communities and we will be looking to do more work to embed this approach across the organisation in the coming months.

For further information contact:

Jonathan Downs
Principal Policy Officer – Oldham Council
Jonathan.Downs@Oldham.gov.uk | Tel: 0161 770 5691



People-centred councils
driving social innovation
putting people first

E: comms@councils.coop | T: [@CoopInnovation](https://www.coopinnovation.co.uk) | W: [councils.coop](https://www.councils.coop)