



**How Comms Teams Can Build More With Less**

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# Efficiency, limitations, and asks of a modern Comms team

Small, stretched comms teams coping with pressure, change, and expectation

- Budgets tightening or flatlining
- Expectations rising
- Channels multiplying
- Risk and scrutiny intensifying
- Teams staying the same size/reducing



# A quick word on where I'm coming from

## My 'lens' and who I am

- Senior leader in a large UK FE college with HE provision
- Responsible for reputation, recruitment, internal comms, and crisis response
- Publicly accountable, heavily scrutinised, politically neutral
- Leading a small, expert team, under constant pressure
- Most Microsoft Copilot licences in the UK & 'Tech Town' status – 'test' team for AI use



# Our reality at Barnsley College

**Everything matters. Everything feels urgent.**

- Multiple audiences, often with competing needs
- High reputational impact and focus – UK Tech Town status, political volatility
- Constant organisational change
- Long-term transformation alongside day-to-day delivery –AI and digital
- A team that genuinely cares about quality – but has halved
- Corporate and Student communications – separate sub-teams



# The point where something had to change

## The things that were keeping us up at night

- Reactive working
- Brilliant people always 'coping'
- Diminishing headspace and time
- Everything and nothing becoming a priority

# Less, but better

## AI as an assistant, fewer channels, better outputs

- Fewer channels, clearer purpose
- Strategic prioritisation: protect, prevent, promote
- Saying no, even to good ideas
- Digital first, AI as bandwidth

## How we tested priorities

### Comms informing the conversation vs comms being 'informed'

- Does this protect or advance the organisation's reputation?
- Does it align with strategic priorities?
- Does it genuinely need specialist comms input?
- What gets dropped if this comes in?

Permission to advise, pushback, and try, not just comply.

# Why AI entered the conversation

## Not as a silver bullet

### We didn't bring in AI to:

- Replace human outputs
- Save money or time

### We brought it in to:

- Reduce time to outcomes
- Remove low-value tasks
- Protect thinking time
- Support judgement, but never replace it



# What AI actually did for us

## Practical applications

- Better internal briefings
- Support with summarising data, overlaying sources, and structuring – synthetic audiences
- Horizon scanning
- Those 20-minute deadlines (!)
- Tone of voice and strategic partnerships
- Internal comms chat bot (agent)
- Policy summary podcast



# Barnsley as the UK's first Tech Town

## What this meant for us culturally

- Permission to experiment responsibly
- Skills first over tools – training and confidence
- Curiosity over fear
- A shared language

Being a Tech Town didn't solve our problems, but it did give us licence to learn.



# What didn't work (and why it matters)

## Lessons learned the hard way

- You are the 'expert' for your organisation
- Tools for the sake of using AI – define the role AI plays
- Guardrails – if the output should look and sound human, it needs to be human
- AI does not replace judgement, conversations, or gut feeling
- No-one has time for a 26-stage prompt (!)
- The aim isn't perfection, it's capacity

## Three practical takeaways

### If you do nothing else

- Give AI a role – define processes, structure, and use cases
- Use AI to protect capacity and thinking time, not fill it with additional tasks
- Demystify AI – invest in training

## Final thought

**Resilient teams aren't built by asking people to cope better with less**

They're built by:

- Respecting limits
- Valuing judgement
- Creating space to think

It's easy to switch into survival mode under pressure.



**Any questions?**

