



Appointed as interim Head of Communications, Policy and Governance, Mark Conway took over a team of 6 within an organisation suffering from low levels of morale, performance and reputation; unpopular amongst its peers but engaged in the urban regeneration of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester, and at a critical time in its existence.

As the organisation established to lead on the Growth agenda in West Northamptonshire by the Department for Communities and Local Government, WNSDC was 'imposed' on the other authorities in the sub-region and given planning powers in such a way as cause considerable resentment of it within the local Borough, County and District Councils, as well as a 'testy' relationship with many other public and private sector 'players' locally.

My approach, having been asked to make recommendations for the communications plan was to argue that 'our job' was to make Northampton and its environs a better place for its current and future population and that the priority should be to make Northampton (and to a considerably lesser extent Daventry and Towcester) 'positively famous' as a growing and attractive place in which to live, work, play and invest. WNSDC's reputation and popularity would be enhanced along the way, if this path were to be followed, but, 'sorry guys WNSDC is not the hero here and it's time to act accordingly.'



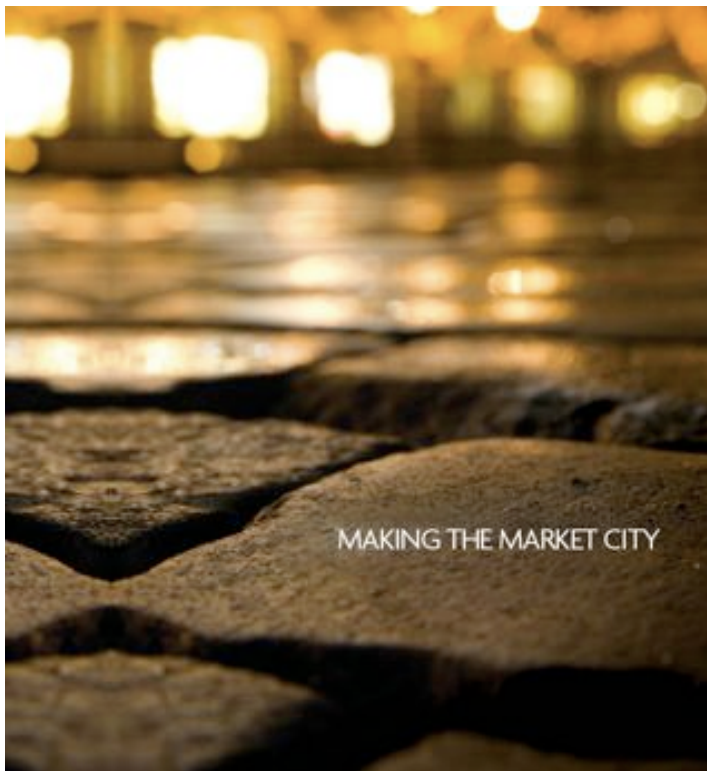
My thinking was that if I could develop, with others, a clear, logical and accepted 'Vision' for Northampton (as the crown jewels county town) and get other public and private-sector organisations behind it, I could not only overcome the hostility and suspicion that was prevalent, but

actually extend my 'team' of communications specialists from 6 to over 100, albeit dispersed within other organisations around the place.

This would give me much more communications ‘horsepower’ and allow others to get behind what we were doing, instead of opposing it at every opportunity as had previously been the case:



This vision was ‘The Market City’ – an aspirational goal and a place-making position that would allow everyone to support it, and which could, if properly communicated, defined and ‘backed up’ with proper development action and intervention where appropriate, give Northampton a competitive edge in the brave new world of World Cities, City Regions and recognition of the growing influence of London on Northamptonshire.



It is a vision that bears further consideration: In simplistic terms (and any successful vision needs to be able to work in these terms), it answers the question: ‘What does a market town become when it grows by 50%?’ – A Market City. It is a phrase that combines two simple well-recognised place-making terms that everyone understands, but may not have seen used together before, which gives it a certain ‘wow factor’ – or head-turning interest at least:

It is, of course much more than that as well, but it is a phrase that stands further consideration and which, the more one thinks about it, makes sense in many ways. Clearly it is not about ‘claiming’ to *be* a city, only Her Majesty the Queen has that gift, but it is about a level of ambition, an aspiration to use growth to

ensure that the place develops to offer 'City Class' infrastructure: City Class graduate jobs, healthcare provision, schools, colleges and University assets, leisure facilities, care for an ageing population, transport links, waste and energy provision - in short, that Northampton should demand better standards of infrastructure than had previously been delivered, as part of its growth programme, instead of just accepting every growing numbers of new homes and people without the associated uplift for both new and existing residents.



It was a vision that I picked up and ran with; instead of establishing focus groups and taking two-years to come up with something that represented the lowest common denominator, I 'sold it' to other public sector bodies, the University, colleges and major private employers in the area including Avon Cosmetics and Barclaycard.



And with this overwhelming support in place, I launched the vision to the Northamptonshire Ambassadors Group, in the Guildhall, with the Chief Executive of Northampton Borough Council David Kennedy making the presentation, but all major authority chiefs also present and in obvious support – in order to demonstrate that this was a joint-initiative, accepted and supported by all, rather than a WNDC imposition on everyone else.

Ownership, or credit, was not an issue for myself, it was more acceptance of the vision proposal, and by showing this generosity (generosity by WNDC to its partners) the launch and ongoing acceptance of the vision could overcome all past hostilities and bring everyone together.



Mark Conway wrote the copy and oversaw the design, layout and print of the vision document, as well as organising and running the launch event and follow-up programme of communications. You can download a copy of the document on the Case Studies page of the website.