



10 lessons for the new Mayor of London

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Introduction

The next Mayor of London is taking office at a challenging time for the capital. Housing pressures, rising costs of living, the future funding of transport and headwinds in the global economy will all challenge the established narrative of London as a world-leading city to live and do business in.

To tackle these issues, the new Mayor will need to hit the ground running, with a clear understanding of what they want to achieve, the powers at their disposal to do so, and how they intend to maximise their broader political power as the directly elected leader of the capital. The way in which the new Mayor chooses to organise their office, appoint their team, prioritise policies, and interact with key figures outside of City Hall will all be key to their chances of success.

Over the last 16 years, the formal powers and wider influence of the Mayoralty have grown significantly, in large part as a result of choices made and policies pursued by the Livingstone and Johnson administrations. The decisions made by the next Mayor will similarly shape not just the lives of Londoners, but the nature and efficacy of City Hall itself.

This report draws on Chatham House-style interviews with 16 current and former senior political advisors and Greater London Authority (GLA) senior executives to provide a series of practical lessons for the next Mayor to consider when taking these decisions. Each of these interviewees offered their own insights on the last decade and a half of London government, the approaches that have worked, the pitfalls to avoid, and the things they wish they had understood better at the time.

Together, these reflections shine a light on the most important decisions facing the new Mayor, and provide a guide to how they can be as effective as possible during their term of office.

Part 1: What are you trying to achieve, and how will you deliver it?

1. Have a mission to guide your Mayoral term and your big policy priorities

The Mayor needs to have, and be able to communicate, a clear sense of their mission and purpose. This is not just important in the context of informing the public about the work of City Hall, but will enable them to establish an organising framework to inform and guide the setting of individual priorities, policies and team appointments.

The overall visions for the capital articulated by Livingstone and Johnson during their two terms of office were remarkably consistent. Both were clear that London's future was as a 'global city' eager to embrace growth; a city that was safe, celebrated its diversity and was business friendly.

However, given housing pressures, rising costs of living, and changes in the global economy, the new Mayor will need to quickly establish the extent to which this vision for the capital is fit for purpose today.

2. Set out clear and achievable strategic priorities to deliver on your mission

The critical issue for the new Mayor will be how to translate their overarching mission into a limited number of strategic policy priorities. The clearer the new Mayor can be regarding these priorities from the beginning, the easier it will be for the Mayor's team and GLA staff to design programmes and projects that deliver on their vision for the capital.

History tells us that although the nature of these policy priorities will be shaped by changing economic and political conditions, they will also require decisive action from the new Mayor.

For example, in 2000 the Livingstone administration had a clear imperative to modernise and improve London's transport system to ensure the city was to compete economically. The Mayor dedicated a huge amount of his office's resources, capacity and political capital to improving tube, bus and rail services across the capital – accepting that there may be trade-offs in terms of the amount of his time that could be spent on other issues.

If the next Mayor is to seriously grapple with issues like housing affordability in the capital, it is likely that a similar concentration of resources, capacity and political capital will be required.

3. Seek to exploit both the formal and informal powers of the Mayoralty to deliver on your priorities

There are a number of formal mechanisms that the new Mayor will need to use in order to deliver on their agenda. For example, the new Mayor's priorities in terms of housing, infrastructure and planning will need to be included in the London Plan, the spatial development strategy for London, as well as City Hall's Budget, which is ratified by the London Assembly.

The Mayor also makes appointments to functional bodies including Transport for London, the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC), and the Mayoral Development Corporations, to ensure that they incorporate the Mayor's priorities within their agendas (see part 2).

Outside these formal powers, the Mayor can also draw on their electoral mandate to exert wider influence and deliver change outside their statutory responsibilities: for example the Livingstone administration used the Mayoral mandate to challenge the Government's Tube Public Private Partnership, to lobby government to prioritise Crossrail, and to implement the – at the time contentious – London congestion charge. Whereas the Johnson administration used the mayoral mandate to, among other things, resist the expansion of Heathrow and argue for a new airport in the Thames Estuary, defend the City from 'banker bashing' and to encourage the London business community to offer more apprenticeships to Londoners.

Alongside appointing Deputy Mayors, the Mayor can appoint advisors tasked with the delivery of specific policy priorities. For example, during previous administrations special advisors were appointed for culture, cycling and the Olympics. Creating such roles enables the Mayor to signal their intent and priorities.

In addition, outside London, the Mayor can establish a strong national and international presence, as both previous Mayors have done, to showcase the capital to the world, and help attract highly skilled people, businesses and investment to London.

Part 2: The importance of assembling the right team

4. Take direct ownership for appointing senior members of your political team

In order to help operationalise and deliver their strategic priorities, the new Mayor must assemble a well-functioning team, with the right mix of political experience and administrative acumen.¹ Given their importance, it is essential that this team is appointed by, and reports directly to, the Mayor.

Where in the past this has not happened – for example, in the early period of the first Johnson administration – there were significant implications for the wider functioning of the GLA. In these cases, candidates were appointed who were either not suitable for the Mayor’s needs or not fully trusted by him or his colleagues.

At the same time, the Mayor should be seeking a diverse range of views, backgrounds and personalities within their core team. Although seen as a highly effective, close-knit unit, as the Livingstone administration went on it ended up suffering from the perception of being overly insular and not open to outside influences, with the suggestion that this in turn led to suboptimal decision-making by the Mayor.

5. Be specific about your team’s responsibilities and roles

There are no formal guidelines outlining which powers or functions should be delegated within the Mayoral administration. Instead, the Mayor is required to give each of their deputies and advisors clear and tangible responsibilities, as well as a series of expectations or targets, which reflect and link back to the delivery of their mission and strategic priorities.

For example, during the second Johnson administration, the Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime was given three targets: reduce the budget by £500 million, reduce re-offending and drive down violent crimes. These were formalised in the strategic plan ‘MOPAC 7’, which enabled the Deputy Mayor to start work immediately and set clear guidance for the Metropolitan Police and local police stations.

The clearer the Mayor is, the more efficient the Deputy Mayors and advisors can be in delivering the Mayor’s priorities, and the easier it is for the Mayor to hold them to account. And when unexpected external events threaten to divert focus away from those priorities, that clarity will mean that the Deputy Mayors and advisors are better placed to respond appropriately.

6. Prioritise securing the right Chief of Staff – they will be your most important political appointee

The Chief of Staff is head of the internal organisation of City Hall and is responsible for filtering out what the Mayor needs to see and which decisions can be taken on the Mayor’s behalf. Therefore, the Mayor has to completely trust this person and their ability to make those judgement calls.

¹ The GLA Act lays out the ‘2+10’ appointment protocol, stating that the Mayor is required to appoint two political appointees and 10 other members of staff to their senior team. However, this remains subject to the Mayor’s wishes; for example, Livingstone made a deal with the London Assembly to adopt a different arrangement.

In addition, they should be completely aligned with the Mayor's mission and strategic priorities, and ideally have the experience of doing a similar job – be that leading a London Borough or a significant department in central or local government.

Specifically, this person needs to:

- Support the Mayor's overarching mission and strategic priorities;
- Command high levels of respect within the GLA, and have demonstrated the capability to lead a large public sector institution; and,
- Be well connected across the wider policy and political arena.

In each of the Mayoral administrations to date the Chief of Staff has played a critical role in ensuring the GLA functions well and the Mayor can deliver on their priorities. Since 2008, the Chief of Staff has also been Deputy Mayor for Policy and Planning. However, as both these roles have individually expanded over this period, careful consideration should be given as to whether it is still feasible to combine these roles in the years ahead.

7. Appoint trusted Deputy Mayors to lead the four big policy areas: Housing, Transport, Policy and Planning, and Police and Crime

Like the Chief of Staff, these four roles are senior and political in nature, and therefore require individuals with strong backgrounds in political leadership, as opposed to providing expertise that will already be provided by officers working within the GLA. A clear division of responsibilities here is vital to an effective administration.

These roles will involve considerable decision-making powers and the individuals appointed should be trusted to, and capable of, speaking on behalf of the new Mayor. It will also be vital that these portfolios are not considered as silos, and that the Mayor creates an environment where collaboration on major projects or overlapping priorities is encouraged.

For example, under the Johnson administration, when the Deputy Mayor of Police and Crime wanted to sell surplus land to reduce costs, they collaborated with the Deputy Mayor of Housing who was looking for land to build on.

The GLA Act also requires the Mayor to appoint a Statutory Deputy Mayor whose prime responsibility is to take over if, for some reason, the Mayor has to step down. There are no other formal obligations or responsibilities tied to this role.

8. Resist the temptation to have advisors for everything

The Mayor's powers stretch beyond their formal, statutory responsibilities. Appointing a set of advisors in other policy areas could therefore represent an opportunity for the new Mayor to emphasise strategic priorities in areas such as cycling, health, or skills. But experience suggests the new Mayor should resist the temptation to have advisors for everything.

Currently, there are advisors for the economy, environment and energy, education and culture, Team London, mentoring, cycling and food. However, as with the appointment of Deputy Mayors, the new Mayor will need to ensure the role and remit of these advisors is made clear from the outset, and that the individuals appointed understand and endorse their overarching mission. There is also a risk that if the Mayor seeks to cover all policy areas, the Mayor's resources and capacity can end up being spread too thinly, to the detriment of delivering on their strategic priorities.

Part 3: Identify and leverage key external relationships

9. Establish a strong working relationship with the boroughs

The Mayor shares responsibility in areas like housing, planning and transport with colleagues across London local government. Although the Mayor enjoys a significantly larger mandate, a higher profile, and ultimately has overall responsibility for devising and delivering a strategic plan for London, most strategic Mayoral priorities need to be implemented by boroughs at the local level.

Despite relations occasionally being strained, both the Livingstone and Johnson administrations acknowledged that constructive relationships with the boroughs were vital to delivering change on the ground.

Partnerships between the Mayoralty and the boroughs have been critical to the development and delivery of major projects within the capital, including Crossrail and the Olympics, as well as other more focused Mayoral priorities. For example, the Johnson administration determined that local initiatives would be the most effective way of reducing crime and improving safety across the capital, and provided funding for them as boroughs lacked budgets for crime prevention.

It will be vital that the new Mayor establishes strong working relationships with the boroughs and develops a keen political understanding of when to use the powers of their office to drive through change, and when to adopt a more consensual approach to making change happen.

10. Be pragmatic in dealing with central government, and build broad alliances to help lobby for change

The Mayor of London also needs to forge a constructive relationship with central government. City Hall receives most of its funding from central government; major projects within the capital inevitably depend upon support from Whitehall to be delivered; and London is subject to national policy initiatives, which have a significant impact on the city's economy, and the Mayor's ability to deliver on their strategic priorities.

Achieving this relationship will not always be straightforward, even when the Mayor and the government of the day belong to the same political party – a fact evidenced during periods of both the Livingstone and Johnson administrations.

It is therefore important for the Mayor to build broad cross-sector alliances to strengthen their position when dealing with the government. During the last Parliament, for example, the Johnson administration sought to lobby the government for the further devolution of powers to the capital by working with London Councils, civil society and cities across the rest of the UK, in the hope of easing the difficult politics of being seen to preference London over other cities.

Given the continued constraints on public spending and the uncertainties facing the global economy, the new Mayor would be well advised to adopt a similar approach when thinking about delivering their strategic priorities for the capital. For example, a coordinated campaign to deliver more housing for Londoners, that includes actors from across the public and private sector, will not only strengthen the new Mayor's ability to deliver on the ground, but will also add further weight to their case for additional support from the government to make it a reality.

Conclusion

Drawing on the insights of those who have worked at the very top within City Hall over the last 16 years, these 10 lessons provide the new Mayor of London with a guide as to how to deliver on their priorities in the years ahead. They show that to succeed in tackling the economic, social and environmental issues facing the capital, the new Mayor must have a clear sense of what they want to achieve, the team they need to help them deliver, and the external relationships that will be key to achieving change.

The new Mayor of London has a unique opportunity to shape London's future as a world-leading city, but will take office at a challenging time for the capital. The reflections contained in this report will help the new Mayor to hit the ground running on day one.

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