

## Preparing for power



**When our group took power at Merton council after the May 2006 election, we had been in opposition for 16 years. Some of our councillors had never been part of an administration and a fair number of the others were entirely new to their role as elected members.**

**In these circumstances, taking effective control of the council could have been a challenge too far.**

However, we had spent more than a year preparing for just this situation and so hit the ground running.

Preparing to take power requires detailed research. You need to consider all your policies not as hypothetical ideas that can be used to make political points, but as part of a real-world programme that will be judged according to what it delivers for residents.

This planning should start as far in advance as possible. If you can begin preparations for taking over the administration a year before the election, do so. If, however, you are reading this only days out from an election, don't panic: anything that you can do now will save you time after the votes are counted and you find yourself busier than you've ever been.

Every new administration will follow its own path, which is why we have not produced a one-size-fits all guide to taking control. However, I hope that this report will act as a form of checklist to spur your thinking and to help ensure that you consider and prepare for as many of the key issues as possible. The timeline which opens this document provides an overview, while later chapters examine the various points in more detail.

**Cllr David Williams, leader, London Borough of Merton**

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**A change in the political leadership of an authority is a heady mix of opportunity and threat.**

**Handled well it can provide renewal and refreshment to an organisation. Old certainties can be revisited and stale ways of considering matters may be discarded.**

Local authorities are complex organisations. They function well when politicians and officers understand each others' roles and operate in an environment of growing trust and mutual respect. These qualities however, generally, have to be earned and then constantly worked at.

Changes in political administration that don't seek to develop this kind of relationship risk destabilising the whole organisation. This in turn can damage the ability of the authority to deliver anyone's programme.

Councils achieve success partly through their own efforts but more and more through partnerships with other agencies. New administrations need to come to terms with this. The skills needed to achieve success through influence rather than the direct application of power are very different and need to be learned and developed.

As a chief executive I was fortunate to have a new administration that was well aware of all of this. This document explains how they went about preparing for a change of administration and what happened next. I am sure it will be of use to anyone who finds themselves in a similar situation.

**Ged Curran, chief executive, London Borough of Merton**

Put together by the Leadership Centre for Local Government. Based on research compiled by Ann Griffiths for the Conservative group at Merton Council and interviews with leader Cllr David Williams and chief executive Ged Curran.



# Timeline

Most things will take longer than you expect, so start preparing as far in advance as possible. Equally, even if you only have months or weeks to get ready, do as much as you can – something will always be better than nothing.

## About a year before the election:

- Begin the research that will underpin your policy manifesto
- Consider finding a mentor who can help you to develop your political leadership
- Begin developing your relationship with the chief executive
- Begin research into best practice at other councils around practicalities such as meeting format and portfolio arrangements

## Final budget before election:

- Consider presenting a complete alternative budget rather than simply attempting to make amendments to that of the sitting administration

## About a month before the election:

- Seek external mentoring and support for the change period. The Leadership Centre runs a programme for group leaders at councils where a change of control is expected
- Develop a communication plan that covers the immediate post-election period. Prepare the documents that you will use to communicate the change of administration to residents, staff and the press
- Prepare an induction plan for all members



**Shortly before the election:**

- You will have much less time to yourself than you expect once you've won. Build thinking time into your programme

**After the election:**

- Implement your 'quick win' ideas
- Implement induction plan for all councillors
- Plan a weekend away or other team-building event for cabinet members and directors

**ELECTION**

**As soon as possible after the election:**

- Meet with the chief executive and other senior staff to outline your plans and what you expect departments and officers to do
- Implement communication plans
- Ensure that council documents and the constitution are changed as necessary to reflect the changes that you have made to policy and process
- Agree business plans, targets and key performance indicators for each department

## What to expect

Taking control will not mean creating an overnight sensation. It's almost certain that some things will take longer than you planned and it's entirely possible that some policies will have to be dropped once you've seen the real state of affairs. For example, you may discover that a pre-existing contract or agreement ties you in to a particular course of action. Good research should help you to avoid most such pitfalls, but there's every chance you won't see them all in advance.

Think the unthinkable, then put contingency plans in place to deal with it. For example, consider what you will do if the election results in a hung council. You may choose to keep this preparation relatively private; however, it needs to be done.

You will make mistakes. When you do, own up to them – at least in the privacy of the group – so that you and your colleagues can learn from them.



### What else you can expect:

- Virtually no time to yourself once you've won
- Some initial apprehensiveness and resistance from staff
- An enormous rush of enthusiasm from your newly-elected councillors, followed, if you are not careful, by disengagement
- Even ideas developed to provide 'quick wins' in the immediate aftermath of the election can take far longer than you expect to implement



## Develop a policy framework

This is the work that will underpin both your election manifesto and the change programme that you will deliver when you are elected. It should be both as broad and as detailed as possible to allow you and your colleagues to explore all available options rather than relying on assumptions or past practice to inform decisions. It will also help to clarify your thinking.

### Subjects it should consider:

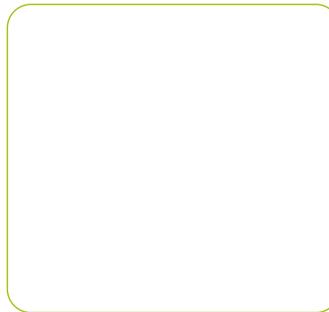
- Everything for which the local authority has responsibility, from council finances to adult social care
- Issues of concern to local residents
- How portfolios are to be structured
- How committees, area forums and so forth are to be structured.
- How council meetings will be held and run
- A timeline for implementation of the ideas

### Initial research can come from:

- Best practice from other authorities, including beacon councils and your immediate neighbours
- The Leadership Centre can help as can other organisations such as the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency and the Local Government Information Unit
- Interviews or informal discussions with cabinet members at other councils

### Find out about other council schemes, partnerships and commitments that could affect your plans, such as:

- Requirements and limitations set by central government and/or legislation
- Local area agreements
- Local strategic partnerships
- The council's business plan
- The council's community plan
- Long-term contractual commitments such as public-private partnerships



### Once initial research is complete:

- Talk to officers about your ideas. You do not need to give them the entire framework; however, raising particular possibilities with them will allow you to draw on their expertise and test your ideas against reality
- Discuss with your shadow cabinet
- Consider circulating drafts amongst the group more generally
- Develop a complete alternative budget. This will force you to cost your policy ideas and thus assess whether or not they are realistic
- Decide on your key priorities. There will not be the time or the resources to achieve everything in four years
- Ensure that each priority is assigned to a particular portfolio
- This ensures that a named office holder will be responsible for its delivery
- Prepare and publish your manifesto
- Make sure that the chief executive has a copy of the manifesto as soon as it is in the public domain, if not sooner

Be aware that the policy framework is an ever-evolving document. You should feel free to add to and amend it as the situation develops or the amount of information that you have increases. However, at some point it will need to be final enough that you can agree a policy manifesto for the election.

# Mentoring

Mentoring can be useful for leaders at a number of stages:

- Peer mentoring from a leader at another council can provide support, development and feedback at any time in a leader's professional development
- Change of control mentoring provides practical support designed specifically to help prepare you for the task of leading and running an authority



## Where to find your mentor:

- The Leadership Centre will contact councils when we anticipate a change of political control to offer mentoring through this process. In this situation, the mentor is not there to offer help with party political tactics or to get involved in campaign strategy
- Organisations such as the IDeA ([www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)) run councillor mentoring programmes
- Through a direct approach

## What it can involve:

- An induction session establishing the ground rules
- Face-to-face and/or telephone conversations
- The Leadership Centre's mentors can cover topics such as establishing a good officer/councillor relationship; what to expect by way of officer support; what, and what not to ask for by way of information; and how to achieve political priorities
- It can be a short-term relationship designed to support the change process (as with the Leadership Centre) or more long-term (often as part of a leader's professional development plan)



# Communication

Your communications policy should address three main audiences: **residents**, **press** and **staff**. Your key messages should be clear, coherent and succinct.

You may wish to prepare press releases and other documents announcing the change of power before it happens so that when the results are announced you can act immediately. Even if you do not prepare complete press releases or letters in advance, you should be very clear about what you want to say. Press interest will begin the moment your victory is announced; you should be ready to take advantage of it.

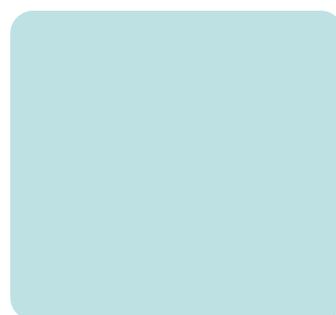
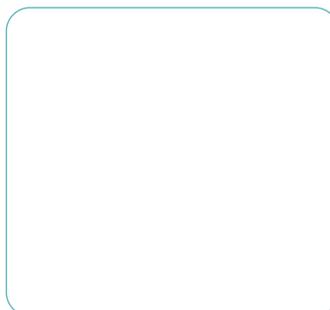
Here we outline communication strategies for the immediate post-changeover period. Please note that these should be seen in the light of your overall communications policy.

## Residents:

- Consider preparing a letter to residents in advance explaining the changeover and telling them what they can expect of their new council. This could take the form of an actual letter or it could be printed in an existing newsletter or council publication. It should be sent as soon as practicable after the changeover

## Staff:

- Start with a similar letter or email to that sent to residents. Make sure that it reaches staff that do not work in an office or that do not have access to email
- The letter should explain that you understand that running a council requires a team effort and that you want staff support as they are the people who will deliver your policies



- Allow enough time in the first few days to make sure that all staff – not simply directors or senior officers – meet either you or one of your cabinet members
- Consider making one of your first appointments a visit to frontline staff who are not based at the town hall. This demonstrates that you understand the importance of their role
- When talking with staff, listen to their hopes and aspirations as well as communicating the vision that you have for the council

## Press:

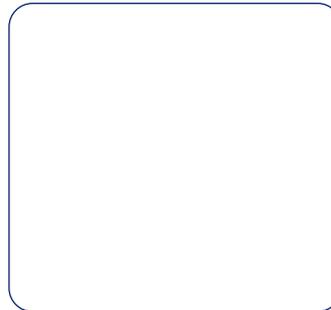
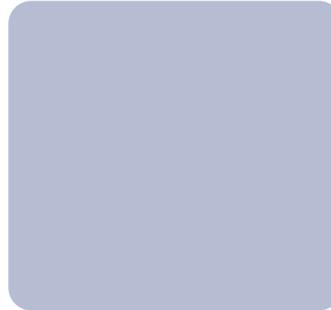
- Have an announcement ready, even if it is not written down
- Be prepared for a lot of late-night phone calls
- Take every advantage of the opportunities that arise now for explaining your manifesto

## Colleagues:

- Ensure that media guidelines are circulated to all members shortly before the election. Remind them that promises made by councillors who have political control carry much more weight than statements made by those in opposition
- Make sure that your colleagues know what is going on throughout the preparation and change processes. Keep them in the loop with policy changes and other developments – regular meetings and emails are useful for this

# Portfolios

The shape that you give to cabinet members' portfolios will be determined by the work that you have done in forming your policy framework. You should know that shape by the time you enter the election period. Consider making sure that your group knows that shape as well, even if you do not announce who will hold each portfolio until after the election.



Prepare formal job descriptions that detail cabinet members' specific responsibilities (see appendix). Seek out examples of best practice at other councils. Be aware that if you do not design these yourself, officers will work with you after the election to prepare them as they need to clarify reporting lines and responsibilities.

**Don't forget the importance of ward members. Consider developing a job description outlining their responsibilities.**



# Relationships with officers

Having good relationships with officers is critical for an effective administration, as they are the people who will be delivering your programme. Do everything you can to develop these professional relationships well before the election; building mutual trust and respect takes time.

## Officers:

- Be aware that the change of leadership may leave officers feeling confused and uncertain; do everything that you can to provide them with clear direction from the outset. Be explicit about what you want them to stop doing and what you need them to start doing
- Help members of the management team feel that they are part of your success
- Consider testing your policy ideas with chief officers on a confidential basis in the policy framework preparation process
- Recognise that officers will know more than you about their areas. Listen to what they have to say and be flexible enough to adapt your policies accordingly, if appropriate
- Consider organising an overnight team-building event for cabinet members and departmental directors. Do not hold this too early – give members and officers a chance to meet each other in a work context first. The Leadership Centre can help
- Try to meet as many officers as possible and encourage your cabinet members to do the same



## The chief executive:

- Meet with the chief executive on a regular basis before the election – every month to six weeks, ideally
- Give the chief executive a copy of your finalised policy framework on day one of your new administration. You can consider doing this shortly before the election, if appropriate
- Set and adhere to clear boundaries. This will help to build trust. Political group leaders and chief executives need to be able to have full, frank conversations without fearing that the details of the discussion will be made public. Equally, respect the fact that the chief executive will not reveal details of your conversations to other parties and do not pressure him or her to do so

It is important to listen to – and be prepared to act upon – advice from officers because this is part of building a relationship between members and officers, but it is equally important to know when to stick to your guns. You will face a certain degree of organisational inertia when you take over, meaning that there can be too much emphasis on finding reasons not to do something. Yes, they have the professional expertise and you should listen to it – but at the end of the day you are there to exercise the leadership needed to make your manifesto promises a reality.

# Pastoral care

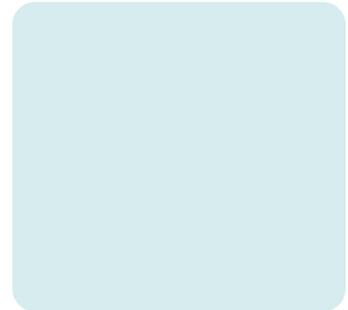
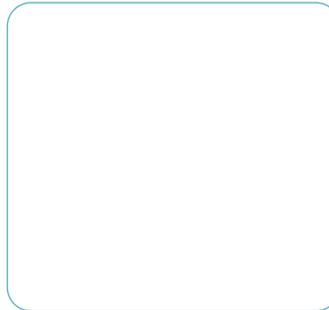
Although winning the election means becoming the leader of the council, it does not stop you being leader of your group.

- Don't expect this to be easy
  - Delegate. You won't have time to do everything
  - Be prepared for the support that your colleagues will need. You may well have a number of first-time councillors who will need to learn the ropes of being an elected member, as well as a number of first-time cabinet members learning about what it's like to be in power
  - Consider pairing new councillors with mentors drawn from the more experienced members of your group
  - Make sure that you keep all members in touch with what's going on and what decisions are being made. This will make it easier to ensure that you are taking people with you
- Hold informal get-togethers and discussions for all members as well as formal meetings. These can range in form from seminars to social events
  - Be prepared for new councillors to become disillusioned. By the end of summer they will have been in power for four or five months. The initial thrill of election will have worn off and they may begin to wonder what they have actually achieved. If you do not ensure that these councillors remain engaged with the party and with the council, you may find that they switch off to politics and never switch back on again



# No overall control

Be prepared – privately if not publicly – for what you will do if you neither win nor lose but find yourself on a knife edge. You need to be able to judge whether you can find acceptable compromises that will allow you to form a coalition while still implementing your policies.



- Know your policy position exactly – which policies are essential, which would be nice to keep, which can be left for later implementation
- Know your potential partner's position in as much detail as possible
- Know the detail of the electoral results
- Be realistic about the strengths and weaknesses in your arguments
- Be quietly assertive but not aggressive in your dealings with potential partners
- Keep the chief executive up to date with the progress of any negotiations



## Appendix: cabinet member portfolios

All cabinet members were sent documents outlining their new portfolios, their specific responsibilities and how these fitted in to the group's policy framework.

The formal job description for each portfolio holder begins with two paragraphs outlining the specific areas of responsibility for each position.

It then sets out councillors' general roles and responsibilities as a member of cabinet. These include:

- Fulfilling their responsibilities as a ward councillor
- Attendance at civic events, especially those relevant to the member's portfolio
- Regular attendance at council meetings, committees, area forums and so forth
- Building and sustaining constructive relationships with the voluntary sector and community groups
- Members making themselves known to staff in the council departments related to their portfolios, for example by conducting a walkabout to introduce themselves within the first week then remaining in regular discussion and communication with staff
- Holding regular meetings with directors of departments relevant to their portfolios
- Ensuring that the commitments and suggestions outlined in the manifesto that fall within their portfolio are prioritised and reviewed

The document then sets out the manifesto pledges relevant to the cabinet member's portfolio, broken into 'will do' (key priorities) and 'want to' (aspirational goals). Also attached is a fuller breakdown of the policy issues and options relating to the portfolio. This is drawn from the policy manifesto.



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