



Boris – one year on

Opinion piece by Baroness Jo Valentine, Chief Executive, London First

A year ago, Boris arrived in post apparently surprised at his electoral success and perhaps a little daunted at the scope of his responsibilities. Suddenly he was the country's most powerful Tory. We all witnessed a couple of false starts with senior appointments, which go some way to explain an initial lack of focus. But latterly there are positive signs that Boris is rising to the formidable challenge of leading the world's most dynamic city. What we'd still like to see is a clear vision for his mayoralty, a defining theme which, in the future will be seen to have characterised the Boris years.

He is driving internal change in Mayoral bodies, bringing in heavyweights to refocus the LDA on London's economic priorities and strengthening the role of the TfL Board to help its management with the heavy lifting of building Crossrail, improving the Tube and tackling congestion. He is reducing costs at City Hall as part of his commitment to freeze his share of the Council Tax. He's also working cooperatively and effectively with Boroughs rather than regarding their leaders as competition (which his predecessor occasionally did), though he sometimes must assert the wider needs of the capital, for example on strategically significant planning decisions.

His sensible and surprisingly readable 'Way to Go' document established a direction for transport policy and is being mirrored by similar policy work in planning, climate change and economic development. These well-judged steers give a hint as to the underlying vision he has for the capital and for his mayoralty, but he should exploit his trump card of communication - in his idiosyncratic, entertaining but highly articulate style - to make that vision more explicit.

As well as vision, we need more concerted action on vital issues which need sorting now. He must ensure that Tube modernisation stays on track, delivering more reliability and less discomfort for passengers and that 2012 brings more for East London than three weeks of flag waving. These are thorny practical challenges which Londoners expect Boris to tackle with his usual gusto.

Unfortunately, Boris' arrival as Mayor coincided with the terrible twins of credit crunch and recession. Here Boris has got the tone absolutely right, resisting the temptation to indulge in banker bashing and concentrating instead on plans for recovery. The challenge for Boris is to show London and its global competitors that he's the man to lead London through the recession and to reassert its position as the best city in the world in which to live, work, visit and do business."

Growth

Planning and Development

We said:

Build more homes to make all homes more affordable

Boris has dropped the counterproductive and inflexible target of 50% of all borough housing to be affordable. That's a good thing, but in today's market, any hampering of development risks making it completely uneconomic and stopping any house building. He has an opportunity to work with the Homes and Communities Agency's £5bn London allocation, although this comes with lots of strings attached. Boris must use all the levers at his disposal to encourage housebuilding of any sort.

We said:

Use Mayoral planning powers more strategically, not to over direct

While there have been encouraging examples of Boris approving new large scale development, some of these have been over-ruled (with the suspicion of political motives) by central government.

But there is also a concern that Boris views London as a collection of Boroughs and may be unwilling to take a strategic decision which overrules local objections – this is most recently evidenced in the Charter between Boris and the Boroughs published last week.

Green results yes, red tape no

We said:

Pursue climate change solutions which don't hold back development or undermine competitiveness

The GLA/LDA work on decentralised energy (working with the business community via London First) has been exemplary in pursuing solutions which offer economic and environmental sustainability and has won support from Government and Boroughs.

Keep London's economy flying

We said:

Support sustainable airport development

Boris's dogmatic objection to Heathrow improvement doesn't sit well with his stated commitment to retaining London's world city status. His 'Boris Island' proposal for the estuary looks at worst, far-fetched and at best, a very long term option.

Transport

Roadspace

We said:

Introduce intelligent road pricing to cut congestion and pollution and raise funds to invest in transport

Boris trimmed the Western congestion charge zone, with consequent loss of income, and appears to have no short term plan to tackle air pollution, though his proposals to boost longer term use of electric vehicles deserve a fair hearing. Pan London intelligent road pricing would demonstrate leadership in this area but is unlikely to be pursued before the General Election.

We said:

Make roads work (with better management of road works)

He has taken steps to strengthen coordination of road works, through a permit scheme and by frequent conversations with senior management from the utilities. But we await data to show that this has had a positive effect. He should press Government for more powers to set credible financial incentives to minimise road disruption from essential utilities works.

We said:

Tailor bus routes to match passenger demand

There has been real progress in this area with TfL now publicly committed to reviewing Oxford Street bus routes, with a wider review also on the cards. This has the potential to make more efficient use of the £660M annual bus subsidy, and reduce congestion and air pollution in some of London's busiest streets.

Overground, Underground

We said:

Improve reliability, overcrowding and comfort on Tube and rail

Oversight of the Tube improvement programme is perhaps the Mayor's most important responsibility. Politicking around the PPP arrangements threatens to distract from the vital management of multi-billion pound enhancements to Tube capacity and reliability – absolutely crucial to London's economic success. Recruiting a permanent, high calibre replacement for Tim O'Toole ought to be the top task in Boris and Peter Hendy's in-tray.

Boris has secured further investment in London overground lines – including extending the orbital route from Surrey Quays to Clapham Junction.

Crossrail

We said:

Work with business and Government to get Crossrail built on budget and on time

Boris's political support for the Crossrail scheme couldn't have been stronger. And with similar commitment from Government, senior appointments have been made and holes are ready to be dug. There are concerns about the means and timing of the contributions from developers and the wider business community. Too big a charge on developers might kill specific developments altogether in this market, while the levying of the business rate supplement needs to be timed carefully, especially in the context of other rate rises and the abolition of empty property relief.

Make London work better

Get people into jobs, not just classes

We said:

Listen to employers, refocus and coordinate London skills training to give people the skills to win and hold down jobs

Boris was a star attraction at the Skills London event (for 50,000 teenagers at ExCeL) where he was quite literally mobbed. He lent his endorsement to the event's aim of increasing the aspiration of young Londoners by introducing them to employment and training opportunities offered by employers and colleges.

We said:

Make the London Skills and Employment Board (LSEB) *the* skills body for London

He has endorsed the LSEB strategy.

Press Government to make work pay

We said:

Use your influence to help more Londoners escape the benefit trap

More difficult in today's economic situation.

Wanted: talented allcomers

We said:

Don't let Government batten down the hatches. Manage immigration to give London the best workforce and effective public services

He has committed no more of his famous faux pas in this area! And he has given strong reinforcement to the perception of London as a welcoming world city.

A capital which feels safer

We said:

Commit to sustainable funding for neighbourhood policing

Business is not interested in any political squabbles over police leadership, but does want policing to work better. He has endorsed the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner's commitment to beat-policing. The City of London, Met and British Transport police services are working on adapting the neighbourhood policing model to the needs of business districts.

Going for Gold

Olympics legacy

We said:

Press Government to spend on infrastructure in the London Thames Gateway, kick start development and transform East London

After too long a gestation period, the new Urban Regeneration Company and its Chair, Baroness Ford will be a welcome, positive force in this area. It's important that the Mayor backs her as she seeks to cut through bureaucratic hurdles to deliver change and opportunity as part of Olympic legacy.

Champion the London Business Network

We said:

Help London's employers and employees benefit from Olympic opportunities

Boris has encouraged other Mayoral bodies to adopt the CompeteFor.com procurement brokerage system, promoted by London Business Network. Some 20,000 London businesses are now registered.

Make the West End the best end

We said:

Improve our tourist areas and theatres and make the most of the economic boost from visitors

Boris is a powerful advocate for London's cultural and retail offering, and after initially cutting tourism spending has responded to the opportunity presented by exchange rates (and some pressure from business) to relaunch London in the US and Europe. 'Only in London' is a campaign which works for Londoners and visitors.

We said:

Reorganise buses and improve the environment for West End shoppers, tourists and commuters

Boris is a highly visible supporter of the West End. He has backed the Legible London programme, which guides pedestrians around parts of the capital, and has also responded positively to business calls for a review of bus routes. Working with Westminster City Council, there remains an opportunity to make more of Marble Arch in time for the Olympics.

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