

Shaping strategic leadership
Combined Authorities Report



01. Introduction

Building consensus. Shaping strategic leadership.

The establishment of Combined Authorities and Strategic Authorities represents one of the most significant shifts in the governance of place since the introduction of devolution deals. While the concept of devolved power is not new, the operational reality of building new institutions, navigating complex political landscapes, and delivering visible outcomes at pace is a challenge that continues to evolve.

GatenbySanderson has worked alongside Combined Authorities since their inception, supporting the recruitment of senior leaders, shaping governance models, and helping to embed new cultures. As the landscape matures, we are seeing a shift in expectations – from reactive delivery to strategic leadership, from siloed operations to collaborative systems, and from transactional engagement to long-term partnership building.

This paper draws together insights from a series of interviews with current and former Chief Executives of Combined Authorities. Their reflections offer a candid view of what it takes to build and lead these organisations, what they wish they had known, and what others might learn from their experience.

We hope these insights will support those embarking on similar journeys and help inform the next phase of devolution in England.

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02. Summary Research

Establishing and Leading Combined Authorities

Following the publication of successive devolution deals and the growing momentum behind place-based leadership, we spoke to a number of senior leaders who have played a central role in establishing and leading Combined Authorities. Their reflections offer a candid and practical view of what it takes to build new institutions from the ground up – from navigating complex governance arrangements to building consensus across diverse partners. While each journey has been unique, common themes have emerged around leadership, culture, delivery, and engagement. The following summary captures the key insights and lessons learned from those who have been at the forefront of this evolving landscape.

Key Findings

- There is no national playbook. Every Combined Authority has had to interpret government expectations independently, often relying on informal networks and peer support to navigate the early stages.
- Leadership must be collaborative. Traditional command-and-control styles do not work in a CA context. Success depends on building consensus, convening partners, and maintaining alignment across diverse political and organisational interests.
- Governance is critical. Early decisions around governance structures – particularly the balance of power between Mayors and constituent authorities – have long-term implications for effectiveness and trust.
- Delivery builds credibility. Demonstrating early wins, even if not perfectly aligned to long-term strategy, helps build confidence among partners and the public.
- Culture matters. Establishing a distinct organisational culture – separate from legacy local authorities – is essential. This includes branding, identity, and values that reflect the CA's unique role.
- The Mayor's role is complex. Supporting Mayors requires tailored induction, clear boundaries, and robust support structures. Their visibility and influence must be balanced with the need for shared leadership.
- Engagement with government is improving. Relationships with senior civil servants are more productive than ever, but navigating Whitehall still requires persistence, clarity, and strategic alignment.
- Internal capacity must be built early. Reliance on secondments and SLAs can hinder autonomy. Dedicated in-house teams are essential for long-term sustainability.
- External support is valuable but must be strategic. Consultants and peer networks can accelerate progress but must be balanced with internal capability and ownership.
- Expect disruption. The scale of change is often underestimated. Leaders must be prepared for uncertainty, burnout, and political tension – and lead with authenticity and resilience.

3.0 The Insights, In Detail

How did you navigate the vesting period?

In general, all respondents felt that the complexity, political sensitivity, and lack of standardised guidance during the vesting process presented a significant challenge. Whilst some did have existing structures to build upon, many of those we spoke to were starting from scratch, often under intense political and operational pressure to deliver.

The majority of respondents highlighted the absence of a clear national playbook for setting up a Combined Authority. Each new authority had to interpret government expectations independently and often relied on informal networks or peer support. This process was felt to be extremely intense with the majority of leaders we spoke to commenting that they needed to learn on the job, whilst simultaneously managing limited resources and balancing this against very high political expectations.

Key Finding

There is no national playbook.

Every Combined Authority has had to interpret government expectations independently, often relying on informal networks and peer support to navigate the early stages.

Key Finding

Leadership must be collaborative.

Traditional command-and-control styles do not work in a CA context. Success depends on building consensus, convening partners, and maintaining alignment across diverse political and organisational interests.

The politics were universally seen as a critical factor. Whether or not respondents were able to successfully navigate the vesting period largely depended on early relationship building between local authorities and the incoming Mayor. Respondents emphasised the importance of establishing proper governance, rather than either allowing the Mayor or constituent authorities to play a dominant role. Generally, it was felt that where authorities achieved their independence early that was a key component of future success. In some regions political tensions played out publicly and this was seen to cause slower progress. Conversely, where areas were politically united and able to maintain a united front (a combination that was not always achievable even with the same political party on both sides) the new authorities were able to secure more funding and devolved powers. Several respondents notice that political unity and clarity of purpose were vital to gaining government confidence and support, largely irrespective of alignment with the government of the day.

How did you navigate the vesting period?

Continued.

The legal process of establishing a Combined Authority was variously described as “cumbersome”, “turgid”, “clunky”, and using other similar adjectives. Many respondents reported facing delays waiting for statutory orders to be approved, which in turn restricted their ability to open bank accounts, sign contracts, and recruit staff. Existing local authorities often imposed ground rules on emerging combined authorities, including stipulating no additional costs, no transfer of powers from existing councils, and unanimity for key decisions. Whilst these conditions did help to secure initial buy-in, they frequently also created governance challenges and slowed decision-making.

The majority of respondents spoke about the challenge of building internal capacity. In the majority of cases, they relied on secondments from local authorities, which in turn led to issues of burnout, conflicts of interest, and limited autonomy. Most respondents agreed that establishing dedicated in-house teams was essential for long term success. The appointment of statutory officers and a strong Mayoral support function (chiefs of staff etc.) were seen as early priorities. Respondents stressed the importance of balancing the recruitment of experienced professionals with fresh talent to avoid replicating the cultures of existing local authorities.

The transition from strategic planning to operational delivery was another significant hurdle. Whilst this was anticipated by many, the extent to which this was a serious issue was underestimated in many cases. Some regions had the advantage of pre-existing structures such as LEPs which eased the transition. Others struggled with underdeveloped project pipelines and insufficient staff to build business cases, resulting in delays to funding. In many responses there was a strong emphasis on the need to demonstrate early delivery, even if it meant prioritising projects based on available funding rather than strategic alignment. This pragmatic approach helped to build credibility but also led to internal tensions over resource allocation.

Several respondents noted that the maturity of the Combined Authority improved over time, particularly in some cases with changes to political leadership and/or new senior officers. This evolution allowed for more flexible thinking, better governance, and a shift from reactive to strategic operations.

Key Finding

Governance is critical.

Early decisions around governance structures — particularly the balance of power between Mayors and constituent authorities — have long-term implications for effectiveness and trust.



3.0 The Insights, In Detail

What steps did you take to establish a new culture?

Respondents described a wide range of approaches to establishing a new organisational culture during the formation of new combined authorities. Whilst some inherited legacy structures and teams, others built from scratch. Across the board there was strong emphasis on collaboration, leadership, identity, and the importance of aligning around a shared purpose.

The majority of respondents agreed that culture began with the leadership of the organisation – both organisational and political. Establishing a strong executive team and fostering effective political leadership was seen as foundational. Respondents cited initiatives including away days (with various degrees of informality) and joint sessions involving council leaders, chief executives, and Mayoral teams, all of which we use to build trust and generate a sense of collective ownership. In several cases, the Mayoral transition was a cultural turning point. Respondents described the need to educate incoming Mayors – especially those without local government experience – on the roles and responsibilities of the new Combined Authority. This included setting boundaries, building relationships, and aligning expectations. In several cases where political rivalries existed (for example, between unsuccessful Mayoral candidates and council leaders) cultural cohesion was harder to achieve.

A recurring theme in many responses was the importance of positioning the Combined Authority as a partner to local authorities rather than a competitor. Respondents stressed the need to support each council's unique objectives while fulfilling statutory obligations. This required ongoing partnership working and a clear understanding of each other's priorities. In some regions, shared frameworks were developed (economic visions or strategic investment plans for example) to align efforts and reduce infighting. These frameworks helped clarify roles, reduce duplication of effort, and create a sense of shared purpose.

Several respondents noted that early combined authorities did not prioritise culture, focusing instead on delivery and compliance. More recent efforts have placed greater emphasis on organisational development and cultural change, with some areas consulting partners and communities to help define values and design principles before even building the structure. Branding and identity were also seen as important cultural tools. Establishing a clear visual identity including logos and email signatures helped unify teams and signpost a new beginning. In regions where multiple organisations were merged (LEPs, transport bodies etc.) there was a particular need to inspire staff who may have experienced role changes, and to try to foster a sense of belonging in the new Combined Authority. Despite the best efforts of those in leadership positions, this was not always achievable.



What steps did you take to establish a new culture?

Continued.

Key Finding

Delivery builds credibility.

Demonstrating early wins, even if not perfectly aligned to long-term strategy, helps build confidence among partners and the public.

Recruitment of the right people was seen as one of the hardest things to achieve. The competitive recruitment market, combined with the sensitive political landscape, made it difficult to build teams quickly. Respondents generally emphasised the importance of balancing experienced professionals with new talent, avoiding the replication of traditional local authority cultures by porting existing leadership teams across wholesale. Some combined authorities inherited specialised teams with strong delivery cultures which helped set a high standard for customer service. Others however face challenges integrating staff from different backgrounds and employment conditions which sometimes led to internal tensions. In general, inclusive leadership and a focus on collective goals were seen as key to overcoming these divides.

Many respondents linked culture to delivery. Establishing a pipeline of ready to go projects was seen as essential for enabling Mayors to make an immediate impact. This requires strong project management, assurance frameworks, and performance monitoring. Delivering visible outcomes help build trust with partners and the public, reinforcing the combined authority's credibility and purpose. In some cases, this meant prioritising delivery over policy alignment, especially when funding opportunities were time sensitive.





What external support did you have?

What external support do you now wish you had had?

Several respondents described the political environment as “lonely” and “hostile”, with little formal guidance or external support available. In the early days of Combined Authority formation, there were few precedents to follow and limited opportunities to learn from others. With time, however, peer networks began to emerge. These included chief executive networks for combined authorities specifically, which have since evolved to become valuable forums for sharing experiences challenges and solutions.

Most respondents highlighted the value of both formal and informal peer support. Being able to speak with others who had gone through similar processes generally helped leaders to troubleshoot issues and avoid common pitfalls. These networks were seen as being especially useful around governance, political dynamics, and organisational development. Some also drew on support from the Local Government Association and leadership bodies such as SOLACE and regional employer organisations. These provided access to coaching, leadership development, and organisational design expertise, though the support was often ad hoc and not necessarily embedded in the long term strategy of the Combined Authority.

Several respondents commissioned external consultants to support specific aspects of Combined Authority development. This included strategic economic assessments, transformation programmes, and organisational design. In one case, a consultancy team not only helped set up the Combined Authority but also served as the interim leadership team until permanent appointments were made. Other respondents cited the use of external providers for specialist services such as legal, procurement, governance, and transport planning.

There was a general consensus that whilst external support was valuable it needed to be balanced by building strong internal capacity. Respondents stressed the importance of recruiting and developing enabling services in-house, particularly in areas such as HR, legal, and programme management. This was seen as vital to ensuring long term sustainability.

Looking back, many respondents wish they had access to more structured long term external supports. Some felt that a dedicated transformation resource and/or support around leadership development would have been valuable. There was a general sense that more proactive support from central government, particularly navigating legal and governance complexities, would have been extremely helpful, as would some kind of national framework/playbook and better integration with government departments to clarify expectations and processes.

What about the role of the Mayor?

The majority of respondents stressed the importance of engaging with all Mayoral candidates prior to the election. This helped to build trust, clarify expectations, and prepare the organisation for a smooth transition. Officers held briefing sessions to explain the role of the Combined Authority and its statutory responsibilities, and how the Mayor would interact with the wider system. Once elected, tailored induction programmes were often developed to help Mayors understand their powers, the governance structure, and expectations on their role. These included briefings on decision making processes, standards of conduct, and the boundaries between personal political views and the responsibilities of the Combined Authority. In cases where the Mayor had limited experience in local government or executive leadership, the induction process was more intensive. Respondents highlighted the need to educate Mayors on the pace of decision making, stakeholder engagement, and the demands of public visibility.

Supporting the Mayor often involved managing complex political relationships, both within the Combined Authority and externally. In some regions, tensions arose when council leaders had previously stood as Mayoral candidates. Building trust across political divides was seen as essential to avoid fragmentation and ensure collaborative working. Respondents noted that the Mayor's mandate did not override the need for consensus within the Combined Authority. The governance model is typically consensual, with no delegated authority to the Mayor. In some cases, political parties influenced how support was provided. One respondent described how their Mayor's party discouraged engagement with Combined Authority officers leading to a breakdown in collaboration. Others noted that Mayors needed to learn to navigate relationships with council CEO's, stakeholders, and central government, and have often had to do so without formal support structures.

Several respondents emphasise the importance of establishing clear structures and resources to support the Mayor. These included dedicated policy advisors, casework/diary management support, and regular catch ups between Mayor and chief executive (both formal and informal). Some respondents created lists of key decisions and appointments for the Mayor to make early on, helping to establish momentum and clarity. Others developed briefing systems aligned to cabinet meetings and portfolio responsibilities, to ensure the Mayor was well-briefed.

Respondents recognised that the Mayor's role is fundamentally different from that of a councillor or MP. In some cases, the Mayor's personal political views created tension within the Combined Authority, especially when public expectations did not align with devolved powers. Officers worked to separate personal politics from organisational responsibilities, reinforcing the Combined Authority statutory role.

Key Finding

Culture matters.

Establishing a distinct organisational culture – separate from legacy local authorities – is essential. This includes branding, identity, and values that reflect the CA's unique role.



How did you engage with your partners in local and national government? Were there any challenges?

The majority of respondents emphasise the importance of building strong relationships with constituent local authorities. This often comprised of regular meetings, shared governance structures, and collaborative working groups. In some regions, joint committees were established prior to devolution to blend services and foster trust – a move that paid dividends at later stages. A portfolio model was commonly used where individual council leaders had political responsibility for a specific policy area, supported by aligned chief executives. This approach helped ensure meaningful engagement and distributed leadership across the region. However, challenges persisted. Local authorities often wanted to retain control over their placed-based priorities and were wary of losing influence to a strategic authority. Political diversity within regions added complexity, requiring careful navigation to avoid conflict and ensure inclusivity.

Key Finding

The Mayor's role is complex.

Supporting Mayors requires tailored induction, clear boundaries, and robust support structures. Their visibility and influence must be balanced with the need for shared leadership.

Engagement with central government was described as fragmented and inconsistent. It was significant this was irrespective of political alignment between authority and national government. Respondents noted that government departments often operated in silos, requiring different approaches depending on the policy area. Many respondents felt, unless they were dealing with senior officials or directors generally, conversations with civil servants lacked the depth and flexibility needed to support devolution. There was a sense that central government did not fully understand the nuances of Combined Authority governance, leading to unrealistic expectations and a one-size-fits-all approach. Despite these challenges, some regions successfully hosted cross departmental discussions and built relationships through regular visits and strategic dialogue.

A recurring theme was the disparity in resources between combined authorities and their constituent local authorities. Whilst combined authorities were often described as start-ups, local authorities were more established and better resourced. This imbalance created tension, particularly when combined authorities were reliant on council resources and staff to operate. Respondents highlighted the difficulty of balancing operational dependence with the need for autonomy. Using traded services from councils, with practical but sometimes blurred boundaries, created friction especially when political priorities diverged.

How did you engage with your partners in local and national government? Were there any challenges? **Continued.**

Key Finding

Engagement with government is improving.

Relationships with senior civil servants are more productive than ever, but navigating Whitehall still requires persistence, clarity, and strategic alignment.

Political dynamics were a major factor in shaping engagement. In some regions differing party affiliations led to disagreements and mistrust. Respondents stressed the importance of recognising the political landscape and ensuring that all authorities felt heard and valued. Building trust required transparency, consistency, and a shared strategy. Successful regions developed plans that reflected the priorities of all partners and communicated clearly how benefits would be distributed (even if not simultaneously). Engagement was most effective when it was not seen as tokenistic. Listening, giving responsibility, and co-developing policy helped to foster genuine collaboration. Leadership development and regular dialogue were also key to maintaining alignment and re-calibrating relationships as the Combined Authority matured.

Funding arrangements were a frequent source of tension. Respondents disclosed a mismatch between direct funding to local authorities and strategic funding to combined authorities, which sometimes led to internal competition and misalignment. This was particularly problematic when funding pots were not applicable across all authorities, creating perceptions of unfairness. Some respondents noted that this dynamic could lead to “misbehaviour” – where constituent authorities acted in self-interest rather than promoting genuine regional collaboration. Clear governance, shared priorities, and transparent decision making were seen as essential to mitigating these risks.





What do you wish you had known at the start that you know now?

Many respondents underestimated the scale of what they were building. The Combined Authority was often treated as a small extension of existing structures, but in reality it required significant staffing, governance, and operational capacity. Early assumptions and political promises such as “no cost to the Combined Authority” or minimal staffing quickly proved unrealistic. Respondents stressed the importance in recognising from the outset that combined authorities are substantial organisations with long-term responsibilities and resource needs.

Several respondents reflected on the drawbacks of relying too heavily on service level agreements with local authorities for back-office functions. While practical in the short term, these arrangements often slowed decision making and limited organisational autonomy. The recommendation was that SLAs only be used on a temporary basis, and that the building of in-house capacity at the earliest moment should be prioritised. This was especially true in key areas like finance, assurance, and governance. In hindsight, securing temporary financial backing from a local authority to recruit statutory offices and establish core systems would have accelerated progress significantly.

Key Finding

Internal capacity must be built early.

Reliance on secondments and SLAs can hinder autonomy. Dedicated in-house teams are essential for long-term sustainability.

Key Finding

Expect disruption.

The scale of change is often underestimated. Leaders must be prepared for uncertainty, burnout, and political tension – and lead with authenticity and resilience.

Strong leadership (political and executive) was consistently cited as a critical success factor. Respondents emphasised that technical expertise was less important than the ability to build trust, navigate complex relationships, and lead with clarity and purpose. Several commented that leadership is not just about the Mayor or chief executive, but also about how council leaders, officers, and partners engaged with the Combined Authority. Early debates over ground rules often created unnecessary tension, especially when expectations were not aligned. Transparency, shared ownership, and clear communication were seen as essential from the start.

What do you wish you had known at the start that you know now? Continued.

Multiple respondents reflected on the challenges of working across politically diverse regions. Differing party affiliations, competing priorities, and varying levels of buy-in created friction that was often underestimated. One key lesson was the need to build consensus early and avoid governance models that require unanimity for major decisions – not least as these were seen as barriers to progress. Engaging with central government was also more complex than expected. Respondents described the difficulty of navigating siloed departments, inconsistent messaging, and transactional relationships. They stressed the importance of engaging with senior officials and ensuring that all relevant departments were aligned, particularly when negotiating funding or policy responsibilities. In the early stages, many respondents felt isolated and lacked access to external support. Over time, peer networks and professional bodies became more established, offering valuable opportunities for learning and collaboration. That said, multiple respondents wished these had been available from the outset. Working with more experienced colleagues, including those from other combined authorities, auditors, and sector experts helped shape thinking and validate decisions. Respondents recommended building these relationships early and using external expertise strategically to complement internal capacity.

Key Finding

External support is valuable but must be strategic.

Consultants and peer networks can accelerate progress but must be balanced with internal capability and ownership.

Several respondents wished they had focused more on organisational design and strategic planning from the beginning. Instead, however, they reacted to immediate pressures in many cases. They recommend setting clear foundations, including governance frameworks, performance systems, and a pipeline of deliverable projects. Understanding the long-term vision and aligning resource accordingly was seen as key to avoiding delays and inefficiencies. Respondents also stressed the importance of being realistic about costs and ensuring that benefits are clearly communicated to stakeholders.



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