

England's local elections 2018: the unusual case of Sheffield City Region's mayoral contest

*On 3 May, the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority will elect its first 'metro mayor', writes **Arianna Giovannini**. Although the mayor will preside over a devolution deal with no powers and funding (yet), this is a contest that is worth watching.*



Dan Jarvis MP, Labour candidate for Sheffield City Region Combined Authority mayor. Picture: [UK Parliament](#) via an [Attribution 3.0 Unported \(CC BY 3.0\)](#) licence

The Sheffield City Region Combined Authority (SCRCA) mayoral election is a unique case within England. Whilst the other 6 'metro mayors' were elected a year ago, the SCRCA contest had to be delayed by a year due to issues related to the [geography of the city region](#) devolution deal and the status of its constituent and non-constituent members. In short, a devolution deal was signed and agreed back in 2015. However, when Chesterfield and Bassetlaw pulled out after a [High Court ruling](#), the powers and money attached to the original deal were put into question, and the mayoral elections had to be postponed. This also sparked [squabbles](#) between the four remaining (all Labour) constituent members of the Combined Authority on the way forward – showing how local leaders struggled to get on and work together, and raising concerns as to how and whether they'd make a devo deal work.

Confusing? Quite. As a result of this, in fact, the new metro mayor who will be elected in a few days time will have next to no new powers and funding (and no salary or staff, for that matter). The metro mayor's first task will be precisely that of bringing together local leaders within the CA and to mediate (both locally and at the centre) so as to put the final seal on the devolution deal.

As explained in a [SCR information note](#) sent to the local electorate:

'The Mayor will be a major figure in the political life of the area. They will act as an ambassador for the area; promoting it as a place to live, work, visit and invest in.

The Mayor will be a member, and chair, of the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority (...) and will have certain public transport powers relating to how buses may operate in the future.

The Mayor and the other leaders of the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority will be able to work with the Local Enterprise Partnership, central government and other organisations in pursuing shared goals.

Further powers and resources may be devolved to the Mayor and the Combined Authority if agreement can be reached in the future. This could include the powers from the 2015 Devolution Deal with Government, such as the £900m of funding to grow the economy and powers for adult skills and training. Both the Combined Authority and the Mayor would need to agree to any such additional powers being devolved.

There is not currently a salary attached to the position of Sheffield City Region mayor. This may change in the future, should agreement be reached on further powers being devolved from Government.'

How a message full of 'ifs' and 'could', built around a scale and institutions that are alien to most local residents, should 'strike a chord' and enthuse people to vote remains unclear, to say the least.

So, against this complex background, it's legitimate to ask who's standing for the SCRCA mayor post, and why? Overall, [seven candidates are standing](#): David Allen (English Democrats); Mick Bower (Yorkshire Party); Naveen Judah (South Yorkshire Save Our NHS); Dan Jarvis (Labour and Co-operative Party); Hannah Kitching (Liberal Democrats); Robert Murphy (Green Party) and Ian Walker (Conservatives). The low-key campaign started to revive slightly only over the past couple of weeks, when the candidates participated in hustings events targeted to the [business community](#) and the [wider public](#).

Having attended a couple of these meetings, the overall picture seems quite clear to me. All the candidates agree on the fact that, unsurprisingly, securing more powers, making the local leaders work together and improving the state of transport and skills provision in the city region are crucial – supporting the alleged economic rationale of devolution deals. In terms of results, there will probably be no big surprise, as there is only one likely winner in the contest: the Labour and Co-operative Party candidate (and Barnsley Central MP) Dan Jarvis. There is simply no game. Perhaps, as in Greater Manchester where Andy Burnham won the mayoral contest hands down, all the other candidates do not seem to have the skills, expertise (or, indeed, the drive) to win. It was striking to see how ill-prepared most of them were at the hustings, and how simplistic (and sometimes naïve) their proposals for the future of the SCRCA were. In essence, Jarvis's political experience on the national stage made him stand out as the only credible contender – in fact as the only candidate that looked prepared and cared enough to put together a full [manifesto](#) for the mayoral post, whilst the others relied on notes scribbled on a piece of paper at best.

So, whilst the result of the election seems to be quite obvious, there are two interesting things to keep an eye on. The first is turnout. The [Sheffield Street Trees 'scandal'](#) has had the effect of sparking a moment of democratic engagement among (mostly middle class) residents of the city. Turnout at local elections tends to be very low (below 40%), and the traction generated by the tree-felling case could have a positive effect in terms of the number of people that will go to the polls to elect one-thirds of Sheffield Council that are elected in this cycle, and the SCRCA mayor. And yet, beyond Sheffield, people in other local authorities that will also elect the metro mayor (Rotherham, Doncaster, Barnsley) may not turn up in big numbers. In Doncaster and Rotherham there are no council elections this year. Considering the low level of public understanding of (and therefore interest in) the work and purpose of the Combined Authority, the meaning of devolution deals and the role of the new mayor, it is conceivable to think that people are unlikely to vote *en masse*. [Turnout at last year's metro mayor elections](#) in neighbouring city regions (Greater Manchester, 28.6%; Liverpool City Region, 25.9%; Tees Valley, 21%) was far from stellar – and a turnout considerably lower than that could hamper the already fragile mandate of new SCRCA mayor.

Secondly, it will be interesting to see what will happen once the mayor is in office. Dan Jarvis wants to lead the SCRCA. But his ultimate goal is that of achieving a [One Yorkshire Deal](#), which has recently been put forward by 18 out of 20 local authorities in Yorkshire, following an [invitation by \(the now ex-Secretary of State\) Sajid Javid](#). In essence, Jarvis is standing on a platform that aims at ensuring that SCRCA could join a Yorkshire-wide deal by 2020 if this was accepted by central government. And, since [Labour has allowed him to keep his MP role if he was elected as mayor](#), Jarvis also promises to use his role in parliament to lobby the government and push for a One Yorkshire devolution deal. If he is successful in championing the Yorkshire-wide proposal designed by local authorities across the region, we could see an [important shift in the devolution agenda](#) in England — from a top-down to a bottom-up system, built on economic as well as identity motifs and with a much wider, regional scale.

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About the author



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