

# Electing mayors for more English cities would increase local democratic accountability and widen political participation. But the government must grant them real power and freedom

England's biggest cities will soon vote on whether or not they want to be run by directly elected mayors. The Institute for Government's [Sam Sims](#) argues that mayoral governance offers significant benefits, but the centre must give mayors real power if the government is to achieve its decentralisation ambitions.



Eleven of the largest English cities will soon hold referenda to decide if they want to be governed by directly elected mayors instead of indirectly elected council leaders. Local Authorities have actually been able to switch to the mayoral model since 2000; either by a decision of the council, or after a referendum triggered by petition. There have been forty such referenda so far, with yes votes in 13 local authorities including North-Tyneside, Bedford and Middlesbrough. So far however, the only big city local authority to have made the move is Leicester. But do the upcoming referenda represent a revolution gaining pace? And if so, what's so great about having mayors?

## Accountability

Mayors turbo-charge democratic accountability. An New Local Government Network poll conducted eighteen months after the first wave of local authority mayors were introduced found that 57 per cent of those questioned in mayoral local authorities could name their mayor. Only 25 per cent of those living in non-mayoral authorities could name their council leader. In the past year two local authority mayoral election debates (Leicester and Torbay) have been shown on regional BBC television- an unprecedented level of exposure for local politics. This kind of visibility is a pre-requisite for accountability. If voters don't know who they should be passing judgement on then they can hardly pass judgement at all.

Mayors also significantly boost accountability by giving the electorate direct control over the political leadership of the council. This is especially important in local authorities dominated by one party. To take an extreme example, Manchester has been Labour controlled since 1965, giving Labour-voting Mancunians significantly less influence over which individual leads their city.

## Soft power

Research on mayoral governance often suggests that mayors wield significant soft power – the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction, persuasion and cooption. Mayors' city-wide direct electoral mandate and high profile make them highly influential. Quantifying soft power is a difficult undertaking (the Institute for Government has tried this [elsewhere](#)) but the qualitative evidence suggests that mayors do enjoy superior soft power. For example, Sir Steve Bullock, the Mayor of Lewisham stated:



Credit: UCL Conservative Society (Creative Commons NC ND)

*My office will tell you that they can pick up the phone to probably any organisation in the borough and if they say 'oh this is Joe Blogs from Lewisham council' then they'll say 'Yeah, alright, alright'. But if they ring up and say 'This is the Mayor's Office' then the person on the other end will say 'Oh, right' and we get responses. But I don't recall that happening when I*

| was council leader.

Democratic mandate really makes a difference when it comes to getting things done. Council leaders usually have around 5,000 votes from their ward and then sixty or seventy from within the council. A directly elected mayor from one of our big cities could expect a mandate of 500,000 votes.

Part of this soft power is the mayor's ability to convene and coordinate across their city. Our [research](#) shows how effective mayors have used this power to help join up fragmented local public services through light touch coordination. A senior officer at Newham council told us about how the leader of the council's role changed on being elected mayor:

*His base had expanded significantly and he had to recognise there were other organisations within the borough like police, the Primary Care Trust, etc ... As the mayor you have to engage with them because all of them are looking to him as a lead.*

## **Widening the talent pool**

A third reason to favour mayoral government is that it reduces the barriers to entry for political office, thus increasing the talent pool from which the electorate can choose. Direct election does away with the need to spend years as a councillor before somebody can run as a candidate in indirect elections. As a result, we have already seen Peter Soulsby and Sion Simon resign their parliamentary seats in order to run for mayor in their respective cities of Leicester and Birmingham. Bob Ainsworth, former Secretary of State for defence, plans to do the same in Coventry. The idea that national politicians would quit in order to run for a local government position would have been laughable before these reforms were announced. Now anyone at the peak of their careers across all sectors, including national politics, have a plausible sideways route into senior local political leadership.

Mayoral governance also widens the talent pool beyond the world of the three big political parties. Of the twenty two people who have so far held mayoral office in UK local authorities seven have been independents. Mayoral governance will give non party-political 'hot shots' from the business and charitable sectors a fighting chance of leading our big cities.

## **What powers will these mayors actually have?**

This is yet to be determined. Currently the only additional, legally defined powers mayors have is that it is easier for them to pass their budgets and policy frameworks (councillors would need a two thirds majority to vote it down) and they get a four year fixed term (council leaders can be removed by the councillors at any time.) The [localism bill](#), however, gives the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government the power to transfer any function of any public body to mayors. Given that these extra powers can only be transferred to mayoral local authorities this gives an added reason for cities to opt for mayors.

The Secretary of State should give mayors the powers they need to drive job creation and help their cities prosper. They should be able to determine planning decisions of strategic importance. This will help them enable the kind of infrastructure investment that drives economic growth. They should also be given powers over transport policy and, if their city sits at the heart of the economic area, chair an Integrated Transport Authority. Since the Mayor of London was given wide ranging control of the London bus system in 1999, introducing uniform pricing and unified, off vehicle ticketing, bus travel in London has doubled. In the rest of the country, where councils had relatively little control, usage has been broadly static.

## **Localism, or default centralism?**

In a speech made at the Institute for Government last year Nick Clegg said:

*Ministers standing at the despatch box will continue to be held responsible for local decisions over which they no longer have any control. This will feel uncomfortable, to say the least: responsibility without power, the curse of the decentralising Minister.*

Our report [Nothing to do With Me](#) investigates the problem of such 'accountability gaps' and highlights the potential for blame to 'default' back up to the ministerial level. Mayors may be exactly the kind of highly

visible democratic buffer needed if the government is going to achieve meaningful decentralisation. On our tour of the referendum cities we spoke to more than sixty-five business, community, academic and political leaders. They were almost unanimous in their view that people would be more likely to vote for mayors if they knew, before going to the ballot box, that mayors would have significant additional powers.

There is then a neat co-dependency in the government's decentralisation agenda. People are more likely to vote for mayors if they are given real power, and the government is more likely to succeed in decentralising power if mayors are in place. If the government wants to see highly accountable, influential and talented leaders running our big cities, and put their decentralisation reforms on a more sustainable footing, they should not be shy in announcing significant new powers for directly elected city mayors.