

One year in, Bristol's Mayoral experiment is making a difference to the city's governance

By Democratic Audit

*Today, the independent Elected Mayor of Bristol, George Ferguson, gives his first "State of the City" address. One year on from his election, **David Sweeting** argues that it remains to be seen whether the decision to adopt the new system will lead to higher engagement with local politics, it has already begun a process of realignment in the governance of the city.*

It is nearly a year since the first directly elected mayor of Bristol took office.

The independent Mayor of Bristol, George Ferguson, complete with his trademark red trousers (Credit: CMU SoArch, CC BY 2.0)

While Bristol is not the only place in the country to have such a mayor, it was the only one of ten cities that said yes to a mayor in referendums held in May 2012. Despite various inducements from central government in the form of looking favourably at city deals, and also the prospect of a mayors' cabinet with the PM himself, Bristolians were the only citizens in the country at that time to go for the option of replacing a traditional council leader with what many see as an American style figure at the head of city government. So, as the Mayor of Bristol, George Ferguson, prepares for his [first 'state of the city' speech](#), it seems appropriate to ask, what difference does having an elected mayor make?

Campaigns for and against directly elected mayors tend to draw on similar arguments. The for camps tend to argue that directly elected mayors will be more democratic and more effective. They argue that when citizens are able to choose the mayor directly, it will lead to greater interest in the political process, more recognition of decision-makers, and therefore that leader will be more accountable once election time comes around. They also argue that directly elected mayors can draw on their direct mandate to influence others in the city, and that a mayor in post for four years can be more effective in making things happen, both inside and outside the council as a result of the stability that their fixed-term brings. The against camps tend to argue the reverse – that directly elected mayors will be less democratic and less effective. There is no way of getting rid of a mayor between elections, so they are unaccountable. And loading decision-making onto one individual centralises power too much, leading to delay and overload.

The ways in which these matters played out in Bristol was, and is, a fair approximation of these arguments. The yes campaign pointed to the low visibility of the leadership of the council, and the number of leadership changes at the council since 2000. In the run-up to the referendum, much was made by supporters of the mayoral model that the council had been held back by years of instability. The politics of the place was characterised as divisive and petty, and a mayor would be able to ride above the narrow-minded concerns of parties to create cohesiveness in the council, and across the city, to enable Bristol to 'punch its weight'.

Certainly there have been changes in the politics of Bristol since last November, when he took office. Ferguson is an independent mayor, yet has tried hard to integrate the parties on the council into his so-called 'rainbow cabinet'. Ferguson has no party of his own, and it may therefore have been a politically shrewd necessity to make such a move, both to bring the parties on board, and to mitigate the centralisation inherent in the model. Outside the council, in the city, clearly the mayor has a greater profile than previous council leaders. Frequently the local paper carries a story and picture of the mayor, and [as I have written elsewhere](#), his policies seem to generate discussion – positive and negative. Whereas mentioning the name of the leader of the council was met with blank or confused looks, now, in my experience, people in Bristol know who you are talking about when you name George Ferguson. I for one will be very interested to see if this translates into higher turnout at election time.

Critics of the new system – especially councillors – argue that there has been a loss of accountability. What the reform does is move the lines of accountability away from councillors and towards the electorate. Yet that is the point of the reform – to reconfigure the relationships of local democracy. Councillors' ability, or at least the ability of the ruling group on the council, to be able to control the council leader through threat of removal has gone. So when councillors protest about the mayor being unaccountable to them, they are correct. Their hugely important role has undoubtedly changed.

But what difference has the mayor made on the ground? What policies has he introduced, that we can be fairly sure that previous administrations wouldn't have introduced, or wouldn't have been able to carry through? And is there evidence that the mayor is able to use his mandate to push through his vision? In one sense it is too early to expect much change. Cities are too complex, too fragmented, and too amorphous to change within the space of a year. There is also the fact that Bristol City Council, along with many other councils, is continuing to face downward pressure on spending and upward pressure on demands for services. Yet that line lets the mayor off the hook. Bristol, despite deprived neighbourhoods, is a well-off, economically buoyant place. It is a culturally rich city, well endowed with economic, social, and political capital. In the past Bristol has been described as being governed by a 'kaleidoscope of recognisable faces', not quite able to make the most of the city's talents. Mayors are supposed to be creative, innovative deal makers who can forge alliances and take forward a vision, by tapping into the resources in their city. Isn't Bristol just the sort of place that a mayor can thrive in – especially one that is one of those recognisable faces?

Ferguson has introduced policies that are clearly his own, such as 'make Sundays special', which entails closing off streets – or opening them up, depending on your point of view – to enable a pedestrian friendly environment in the city centre over the summer on a number of Sundays. However there are more complicated and contested issues that the governance of Bristol has been wrestling with for some time. These include improving transport, and the provision of an arena in the city and Ferguson is attempting to press ahead with these. Outside the city, many mention that Bristol is more connected. The idea of a mayors' cabinet may have been quietly forgotten, but my understanding is that central government is much more receptive to representations from the city than it once was. Ferguson is also prepared to beat the drum for the city on the international stage, and while he points out that much of the groundwork for the bid had been carried out before he took office, it seems more than coincidence that Bristol was awarded the status of [European Green Capital](#) in 2015.

So what's the verdict? The democratic arguments are panning out as expected, and we'll just have to wait and see if this reform has any impact on electoral turnout. As for effectiveness, the mayor of Bristol was grafted on top of an existing institution, and unlike say Ken Livingstone, the first mayor of London, Ferguson was not able to use new powers from a new institutional base to introduce new policies, such as the congestion charge. So there was never going to be a big bang. Rather, what appears to be happening is realignment, or evolution, in the governance of the city, which puts the onus on the mayor to achieve change. I'm minded to conclude that because of the favourable local conditions, if the mayor of Bristol isn't successful in taking the city forward, then it will be very difficult for any other form of governance to do any better.

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