Has the introduction of directly elected mayors advanced or detracted from democratic innovation in English local government?

By Democratic Audit

*Despite very limited adoption of directly elected mayors in English local government, the reform has remained popular with national political leaders from both the Conservative and Labour parties. In this post **John Fenwick** and **Howard Elcock** consider why, and explore how elected mayors pose a challenge for several other aspects of local democracy.*

It is now more than a decade since the first directly-elected executive mayors in England took office. Local authorities, following public consultation and affirmative referendum, were able to establish mayoral government in place of the existing council leader and committee system. Drawing inspiration from European and American experiences, the elected mayor appealed to both New Labour and Conservative policy-makers because it offered an apparent solution to persistent problems of weak local leadership and bureaucratic inertia.

In particular there were three chronic problems: unduly protracted decision-making caused by complex and process-driven committee structures; poor cross-departmental co-ordination, especially when dealing with the "wicked issues" that require multi-departmental agreement; and the lack of leaders who are readily visible and available to external stakeholders in the business, labour and voluntary sectors. The powerful image of the world's great urban leaders was implicit in this favourable view of the executive mayor. This innovative figure in English, and potentially Welsh, local government would enjoy decisive executive authority – and a direct democratic mandate.

Yet things were not so simple. For instance, in Newcastle upon Tyne Lord Adonis discovered strongly entrenched opposition to the idea of an elected mayor, based perhaps on memories of the era of the 'city boss', T Dan Smith. Arguably there is general public unease or even hostility to the introduction of a powerful single individual to run our local affairs: a cultural dimension which differentiates this country from some other societies regarded as models for this attempted policy transfer. Despite the aspirations of successive governments, the directly elected mayor has not been widely adopted. Under legislation enacted in 2000, many of the first local referendums rejected the mayoral option. Where a mayor was adopted it often followed a crisis in the local council, including examples of local leaders being jailed for corruption, or a more general public disillusion with long standing one-party rule.

In 2012 the coalition government initiated 10 further mayoral referendums in selected English cities but in only one city – Bristol – was there popular assent for establishing the office of mayor – and this was the result of repeated leadership crises in the City Council. Overall, there is no evidence of widespread public support for mayors, yet the prospect of more mayors – indeed, mayors with enhanced powers – remains firmly on the policy agenda. This is interesting but also puzzling.

Drawing from a decade of research, our most recent article considers reasons for the persistence of the mayoral experiment, its broad support across political parties and the importance of specific local factors in the relatively few areas where mayors exist. It finds little evidence of public enthusiasm (to some degree replicated in other countries). It suggests that the relationship of mayoral leadership to 'place' remains problematic. Analytically the article uses our leadership grid to link the governmental, governance and allegiance roles of mayors to the problematic nature of local leadership and it also explores the legal-constitutional, informal and personal attributes that mayors and other leaders need.

The article also finds that although further legislation in 2007 (under which the office of elected mayor could be established by simple council resolution rather than referendum) potentially supported expansion of the mayoral system, this has not occurred. Two areas with elected mayors have abolished the office. In 2014, there are

(excluding the London mayor, a different job with different powers) only 15 directly elected mayors in England.

In judging whether the introduction of the directly elected mayor advances or detracts from democratic reform in England we would identify several problematic aspects.

First, central government hesitation over how far to encourage or even compel the adoption of the mayoral system produced faltering results, perhaps because neither major party identifies any political premium in pushing the policy too hard. Yet international experience suggests that if a Government thinks elected mayors are a good idea, it should make their adoption compulsory, as the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia did in 1994, compelling all its local authorities to adopt elected mayors by 1999. The process could begin in Britain with certain categories of local authority, such as metropolitan borough councils or councils over a certain size. Yet this would of course undermine the crucial element of local democratic choice in deciding to opt for office of mayor.

Second, the possible election of "metro mayors" in wider city regions, including the former metropolitan counties or the nascent Combined Authorities, with a remit covering several councils and embracing strategic responsibilities for economic development, planning, transport and infrastructure would advance the mayoral agenda. It would however place a question mark over the future of local authorities within such areas and would highlight the familiar tension between localism and centralism in English public policy.

Third, a mayoral role which spans more than one of the existing units of local government has implications for the role of the Chief Executive and other senior officers, who increasingly have responsibilities within more than one local council. This generates a cost saving but there are serious and untested implications for local democracy and public engagement if councils are increasingly to share both political and managerial leadership.

Fourth, notwithstanding the perceptions that mayors themselves may have of their impact thus far, there are no agreed or reliable measures of whether elected mayors have had any measurable impact (for good or ill) locally. A major continuing policy initiative is built on few empirical foundations.

Fifth, the relationship with party politics remains complex. Mayors were intended to cut through local party politics, encouraging independent candidates to come forward with something new to offer. Independents initially did have some prominence amongst the small group of elected mayors, but subsequently local parties have reasserted their influence. Indeed, executive mayors may entrench rather than challenge party control when their own party enjoys a majority amongst elected councillors.

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Over the past ten years the authors have published several papers on the directly elected mayor. Their most recent – Elected Mayors: Leading Locally? – *was published in Local Government Studies in January 2014*

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