

A northern powerhouse, or an unwelcome imposition? Experts respond to George Osborne's Greater Manchester Mayor proposals

By Democratic Audit UK

The Chancellor recently announced that in order to help make his "Northern Powerhouse" idea reality that the Greater Manchester City Region would see itself gain an elected, "London-style" Mayor, despite residents of Manchester City Council narrowly rejecting proposals for an Directly Elected Mayor for their local authority in 2011. **Democratic Audit** asked experts to respond to the news, with mixed results.

Colin Talbot, Professor of Government, University of Manchester

Devolving powers from Westminster/Whitehall is to be welcomed, given our massively over-centralised system. But unless this is done through political consensus it could lead to even more instability in our system of local government, which we've had for nearly 40 years now with almost constant reorganisations.

An example is the imposition by the Chancellor of an elected Mayor for Greater Manchester, something resisted by Manchester's local authorities and specifically voted against for Manchester City Council itself in a referendum.

Indeed it is not at all clear that any of the proposed changes would survive the outcome of the next General Election in May 2015, which means this specific set of changes could be dead before it even starts.

If politicians in Westminster are serious about devolving power they need to do it through consensus, both at Westminster and with the localities – not through blackmailed concessions designed to suit their own political agendas.



Karin Bottom, Lecturer in British Politics and Research Methods, University of Birmingham

Whoever is elected to lead the Greater Manchester Combined Authority will largely be concerned with economic growth, service delivery and innovation. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the office's legitimacy will, in part at least, rest on its ability to galvanise the electorate and secure a healthy turnout at the ballot box. To date, the public has shown little interest in directly elected mayors and while the new and improved 'metro mayor' may well attract more enthusiasm, it may not and thus runs the risk of attracting the criticisms which have beset current mayoral and PCC models.

In this sense, the debate needs to extend beyond its current boundaries and start to address the challenge of public engagement. If it does, it has the capacity to engage the public on an entirely new level. Ultimately though, the challenge lies with the parties and how they choose to



conceptualise this new manifestation of elected mayor.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Senior Lecturer and Head of Politics, Liverpool University



This week's announcement that new powers and resources will be granted to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority marks an acceleration of efforts, begun under the last Labour government, to devolve powers to English city-regions. The extent of the devolved powers, and the agreement to link them to the creation of a directly-elected 'metro mayor' for Greater Manchester, underlines the current government's seriousness about devolving power on a case-by-case basis to metropolitan areas.

The decision to set Greater Manchester off running as the hare others will have to try to catch is not surprising. A consensus has emerged in recent years that devolution in England needs a 'prime mover' to trigger other areas to develop similar plans and ambitions. Of all the English metropolitan areas, Greater Manchester is by far the best placed to push ahead with a city-regional approach.

Despite this superficial logic, however, 'devolution on demand' raises at least two fundamental concerns.

First, there is precious little evidence of any enthusiasm for the idea of an elected mayor for Greater Manchester among the city-region's residents or, indeed, among the 10 council leaders who have agreed to the change. Even the man instantly seen as the favourite for the job, the long-standing Labour leader of Manchester City Council, Sir Richard Leese, is deeply sceptical about the benefits of directly-elected mayors.

Second, it is not difficult to anticipate some of the problems which are likely to arise from this ad hoc approach to devolution. It will take time for other city-regions, let alone non-metropolitan areas, to follow Manchester's lead and they will need to do so by negotiating bespoke packages with central government for their respective (generally small) bits of England. The inevitable outcome will be that sub-national government in England becomes even more of a bizarre patchwork than it is already.

Richard Berry, Research Associate, Democratic Audit UK



This is surprising, but welcome news. No doubt some will react negatively to the idea of the Treasury imposing a new form of governance on the city, one which its leaders have long been reluctant to adopt. Only a month ago I had a [public disagreement](#) with Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council, who declared his opposition to a "London style mayor" in Greater Manchester. The reality is that if the UK's major cities want to exercise more power over their affairs, including their finances, their leaders must have strong democratic mandates.

The failure to consult Mancunians on the proposal is a legitimate concern. But in many ways the re-introduction of a conurbation-wide democratic structure is righting a previous wrong, when the Greater Manchester Council was abolished in 1986. That and subsequent reform left political

power in the city – to the extent Whitehall allows local decision-making – in the hands of ten indirectly-elected, relatively obscure council leaders. Those leaders have taken the admirable step in recent years of pooling authority over some major issues in the form of the [Combined Authority](#). Now it is time for the people of Greater Manchester to take charge again.

David Sweeting, Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies, University of Bristol

In considering the formal institutional arrangements around the proposals for the Greater Manchester Mayor, it is clear that what is being created is a ‘strong mayor’, with considerable decision-making powers and freedom to act. There are three characteristics that are worth noting that underpin the potency of the position. First, there is the significant matter of being directly elected. This gives the mayor legitimacy and profile that no other leader can claim across Greater Manchester as a whole. The job of Police and Crime Commissioner is being rolled into the post, and unlike other English mayoral systems, there are no plans to elect councillors alongside the mayor. So the Greater Manchester Mayor will be the only elected politician to be able to claim to represent the entirety of the city region.



Second, the job of holding the mayor to account falls to the current ‘scrutiny pool’ of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, comprising 30 councillors from each of the ten authorities across the city region. Scrutiny processes in local government are already hamstrung by uneven power relationships between those scrutinising and those scrutinised. It is difficult to envisage local councillors elected on a ward basis being able to speak with equivalent authority to the Greater Manchester Mayor. Third, there will be a cabinet around the mayor, consisting of the leaders of the ten constituent authorities of GMCA. This cabinet has only a ‘supporting and advisory function’. The mayor allocates responsibilities within this cabinet, and, while the cabinet could reject mayoral strategies, it requires a two-thirds majority to do so.

So what is being created is, within the formal institutional arrangements, a strong mayor with concentrated decision-making power. This is consistent with other English mayors, where accountability runs directly to the electorate at the ballot box.

Andrew Carter, Acting Chief Executive, Centre for Cities

There is a strong national economic argument for empowering Greater Manchester, and the fact remains that the devolution we urgently need to see to grow the UK’s cities must also go hand-in-hand with new forms of governance. And, as a local leadership model, a mayoral system offers the greatest benefits with least additional bureaucracy.



As a directly elected representative, a mayor can provide visibility and legitimacy as an advocate for their city, and encourage strategic decision-making that aligns with the interests of the wider economy. It is likely that once people can see the difference such a system could make to the functioning and performance of their community, their support for the mayoral model will grow organically.

It should be noted that, given the significant scale of powers that have been put on the table for Greater Manchester’s ‘metro-mayor’, there will also be a need to increase their accountability, to

| *both their constituents and Westminster. After all, with great power comes great responsibility.*

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