

# The Government's failure to hold a referendum on the creation of a directly elected mayor for Greater Manchester may undermine the legitimacy of this important new office

By Democratic Audit UK

*George Osborne recently announced that Greater Manchester was to get a new 'metro Mayor' with enhanced powers, despite the decision of Manchester's voters to reject a City Mayor in a recent referendum. Here, **John Fenwick** argues that there is political rationale for avoiding a plebiscite, and that the eventual office holder may be marred by a perceived lack of legitimacy, whatever the election result.*



*The bee – Manchester's emblem of industry (Credit: Duncan Hall, CC BY 2.0)*

On the tenth anniversary of the referendum which rejected an elected [assembly for North-East England](#), regional devolution is now back on the radar of the main political parties. But the agenda has changed. No more proposals for Parliamentary-style assemblies. This time the focus is on city-regions in the guise of the new Combined Authorities. The first such Authority was set up by the ten councils in [Greater Manchester in 2011](#), followed by four further conurbations in 2014. The powers devolved to [Combined Authorities](#) emphasise strategic priorities including transport planning and economic development. But now such devolution has been firmly linked to the hitherto faltering expansion of the office of directly-elected mayor. George Osborne has announced the creation of an [elected mayor for Greater Manchester](#), with enhanced powers including control of existing health and social care budgets (a power not enjoyed by the London mayor) and incorporating the role and powers currently exercised by Police and Crime Commissioners.

According to Osborne this will give the people of Greater Manchester a stronger voice and the opportunity for additional benefits including “an Oyster-style travelcard”. Envisaged as taking office in 2017, this maxi-mayor will work with a cabinet composed of the elected leaders of the ten constituent councils in Greater Manchester who will exercise greater influence over the mayor's actions, including powers of veto, than is the case with existing elected mayors. There is explicit government endorsement for adopting this model in other Combined Authorities too. Indeed, the new government message is that if you want quasi-regional delegation, decentralised budgets

and more devolved powers, you must have a mayor: that's the deal.

There is no question that this arrangement for English sub-national governance is different and new. Indeed it might cleverly wrong-foot the political opposition by co-opting elements of their own semi-formed plans for regional devolution. But there are potential obstacles. The move will require legislation, and the Parliamentary timetable in the run-up to the General Election in 2015 is tight. To complicate matters, one of the ten councils involved ([Salford](#)) already has its own directly-elected mayor after a positive referendum vote in 2012. Architects of the new office of metro-mayor may reasonably argue that such practical issues can be dealt with, but there is a bigger problem. It is notable that such a significant innovation for the North West is taking place without any public input. There was no referendum on establishing the office of Greater Manchester mayor.

Although the democratic shortcomings of this are evident, the political reasons for avoiding a referendum are equally clear. Whenever the prospect of establishing a directly-elected mayor has been put to voters in England and Wales by means of a local referendum, there has been [little evidence of public enthusiasm](#). Excluding the London mayor (a different post governed by different legislation) there are, at the start of November 2014, only fifteen elected mayors in England plus one more area ([Copeland](#)) due to hold its first election in 2015. In one of the existing mayoral councils, a team of government-appointed commissioners is about to arrive to oversee its affairs. The story of the directly-elected mayor in England is not one of overwhelming success so far. Three points can be made about this state of affairs.

First, central governments of whichever political hue and for whatever reasons remain keen on expanding the numbers of elected mayors. Although party political attitudes to adopting mayoral systems vary locally, depending on political circumstances, at national level both New Labour and the Coalition have actively sought the expansion of mayoral governance. Secondly, outside London, elected mayors are mainly not located in the big cities where government imagined this engine of urban leadership would exercise its powerful role, the public in cities including Leeds, Birmingham, Newcastle, Sheffield and indeed Manchester itself (and another constituent part of the Greater Manchester area, Bury) having all said 'no thanks' in referendum votes. Bristol is the only big city outside London to institute the [office of mayor with the mandate of an affirmative local referendum](#). Thirdly, and due no doubt to a series of negative referendum votes, legislation in 2007 enabled the creation of a directly-elected mayor by simple council resolution (in England only; a referendum is still required in Wales). Hence there are elected mayors in Liverpool and Leicester by council decision not referendum.

Cynics might now conclude that the Greater Manchester mayorality simply merges two policy failures of current and previous governments: regional policy and directly-elected mayors. The degree of public endorsement for this new city-region super-mayor will subsequently be tested by levels of participation and interest in the mayoral election campaign. However, in conferring any lasting legitimacy, the eventual result may be of less significance than the turnout of voters at the first election for mayor of Greater Manchester.

—

*Note: this post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

—

**John Fenwick** is Professor of Leadership and Public Management, Leader of the Organisation and Human Resource Management Subject Group Department at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University

