


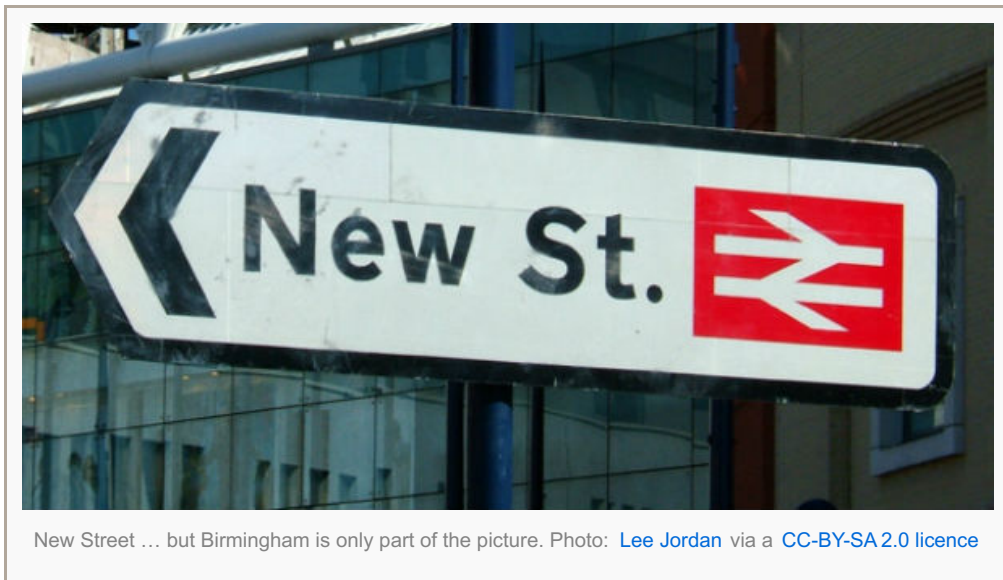
Andy Street has just three years to unite the West Midlands under his mayoralty

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, has three years to make a success of the newly-created job. At first, **Catherine Staite** says, his ability to bring together the various political and community players will be more important than his formal powers, which are not great. He also needs to ensure that Birmingham's historical dominance and the investment flowing into the city does not leave the rest of the region feeling ignored and resentful.*



The introduction of six new directly elected, executive 'metro' Mayors on 4 May – in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Tees Valley, Liverpool Region, Cambridge and Peterborough and the West of England – will lead to radical change in the local political landscapes. The leadership challenges and opportunities lie in three broad areas:

- whether contested leadership environments can be mediated to avoid the risk of destructive turf wars
- the vital importance of collaborative leadership skills to unite and mobilise a wide range of stakeholders
- the need to understand and manage the often conflicting, mutual expectations of all the key players on the field, including central government.

The Conservatives' [Andy Street](#) won a very close-run race, with 238,628 votes against Labour's Sion Simon's 234,862. His election brings an extra dimension to an already complex political and organisational environment in the West Midlands. He'll be working with the [West Midlands Combined Authority](#) – which is still a new organisation, made up of seven sovereign local councils, Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton – each with their own leader and cabinet. Those council leaders have previously been the most senior politicians in their own councils, positions they have achieved – in many cases – after long political careers. They will now find themselves in a subordinate position to Street who, apart from in one council, is their political opponent. The level of political maturity which all of the key players bring to these new relationships will set the tone for the crucial next three years.

Relationships between the seven councils have not always been easy, with a strong sense among the other six that Birmingham has been too dominant in the region. The signs of renaissance are clear to see in Birmingham, with a skyline full of cranes and an influx of young professionals attracted from London by a vibrant city and notably cheaper housing. It will be vital that Street's agenda for renewal is seen to benefit all seven council areas.

Like all the newly-elected Mayors, Street's powers are made up of those delegated by central government and those passed on by the WMCA through its constitution. Notwithstanding central government's commitment to strengthening accountable local leadership through the introduction of Metro Mayors, they have not yet delegated many major powers. Given the complexity of the issues facing the West Midlands, Street's convening power will be much more significant than his initial formal powers. His ability to bring people together, including residents, councils, other statutory services, with business, the voluntary and community sectors and to harness collective energy and resources to tackle complex social and economic challenges, will be crucial to his success. The experience of earlier generations of elected Mayors, including in the US and Europe, suggest that the higher the level of public interest in the role, measured by voter turnout and the effectiveness of the Mayor as a convenor, the more likely Mayors are to garner new powers over time.

In the West Midlands, Street's focus is on renewal and he's seeking quick wins on improvements to the transport network to reduce congestion and improve air quality. He's also keen to see land released for both industry and housing. He recognises the importance of technology, not only to drive economic growth in the region but also to have a beneficial impact on people's lives.

It's notable that these and other ambitions, such as improving health and wellbeing, can only be achieved by collaboration with major stakeholders in the region. For example, he will have some compulsory purchase powers but responsibility for planning remains with each of the individual local authorities. Many of his key goals can only be delivered if he is able to bring a wide range of competing and conflicting interests together under his leadership and influence them to do their part to deliver his ambition to shape 'a region that works for everybody, no matter how strong or weak you are', as he said in his acceptance speech.

A first term of only three years means Street doesn't have long to make an impact. Yet the progress he makes by 2020 will determine the value the West Midlands public place on the role, and the extent to which central government are willing to devolve more powers in the future.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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