

What impact do mayors have on the cities that elect them?

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Greater Manchester will become the next urban area in the UK to directly elect a mayor, following Bristol who first elected a mayor in 2012. One of the frustrations in the debate around directly elected mayors, however, is the lack of empirical evidence around which to evaluate their impact. Here, [David Sweeting](#) presents some early analysis of data from both before and after the introduction of the mayoral system in Bristol.



Recently [George Osborne](#) announced the creation of a 'metro-mayor' for Greater Manchester. In doing so he has joined a long line of heavyweight politicians who have endorsed the idea of directly elected mayors as at least part of the solution to issues in urban governance in English cities. From as far back as Michael Heseltine in the early 1990s, via Tony Blair, and through David Cameron the idea of a single figure to govern our cities has resonated strongly in Whitehall. In the press release on Manchester's metro-mayor, Osborne is quoted as saying: "This will give Mancunians a powerful voice and bring practical improvements for local people, with better transport links, an Oyster-style travelcard, and more investment in skills and the city's economy". The prospect of other cities introducing similar figures is clearly back on the agenda – whether on existing city boundaries or across a city-region.

One of the frustrations in the debate around directly elected mayors is the lack of empirical evidence around which to base judgements on their impact. Competing camps tend to paint over-idealised or over-pessimistic scenarios, depending on the position they wish to advocate. The pro-camp points towards the creation of a powerful central focus for urban governance. A leader of place rather than the council, this figure increases interest in civic affairs and is able to use their profile for the good of their areas, joining up diverse interests, and is firmly held to account at the ballot box every four years. The anti-camp tends to warn of the dangers of centralisation, with a directly elected mayor able to have free rein over the electoral cycle, yet with no reason to suppose that this figure is better able to work with diverse interests than traditional council leaders in their areas, often with concerns about the 'wrong' sort of person being elected.

In 2012 Bristol introduced a directly elected mayor, based on the city council area of Bristol. [The Bristol Civic Leadership Project](#) is analysing the introduction of the new system, drawing on empirical data from before and after its institution, both from members of the public in Bristol, and from different sectors involved in the governance of the city. We have reported our most recent analysis in our [Policy Briefing, published via Policy Bristol](#).

Here I discuss two findings that are likely to be of interest in the debate around the introduction of mayors in other cities. The first is that there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of citizens who agree with the statement, 'the city of Bristol has visible leadership'. It has risen from 24.1 per cent in 2012, before the introduction of the mayoral system, to 68.6 per cent in 2014. This is a startling rise, and provides a boost to those who argued for the introduction of a mayor in Bristol on the basis that existing city leadership lacked sufficient public profile.

The second is that there are very different views on the introduction of the mayor in different sectors of governance in the city. Our survey of civic leaders in 2012, before the introduction of the mayoral system, found that, on the whole, councillors were much less positive about the introduction of a mayor than other respondents from the public, private, and third sectors in the city. This is significant because directly elected mayors are often advocated on the basis that they will facilitate positive relationships across the city beyond the council chamber. Our research suggests that this may well be the case, but there clearly would be work to be done to convince councillors of the benefits of the system.

Our project in Bristol is ongoing, and in future we will be able to report a much larger, more rounded set of results. As we have data from both before and after the introduction of the mayoral system in the city, our work is well placed to

shine light on claims about profile and visibility, or relationships between sectors, as a result of changing the system of governance, as reported above. Of course, there are limits to these claims, both as a result of methods used, and as a result of the complex nature of urban governance. For example, survey research is not sophisticated enough to disentangle the impact of the change in governance system and the change in political leader. There are also limits to the transferability of these results beyond the Bristol context. In relation to 'metro-mayors', for example, there is the issue that the mayoral system in Bristol was introduced on existing city boundaries, whereas, for example, the Manchester proposals are across the sub-region. This inevitably adds a layer of complexity when establishing new governance structures that are both effective and democratic. We nevertheless hope that other cities considering a variant of the directly elected mayor model of decision-making will find these results very useful in thinking through the consequences of introducing mayoral governance in their cities.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [James Clark](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

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