

What can we expect from a metro mayor?

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Background

In May 2017 six city regions in England will elect 'metro mayors' to head 'Combined Authorities' which cover several local councils. The Combined Authorities do not replace existing local authorities but create a new tier of sub-regional governance. Yet, the imminent arrival of metro mayors has yet to achieve a substantial public profile.

This Policy Report sets these elections in context by raising wider issues of city region governance and mayoral political leadership. It then focuses on the West of England and suggests some key issues that should feature in the debate as the mayoralty is established.

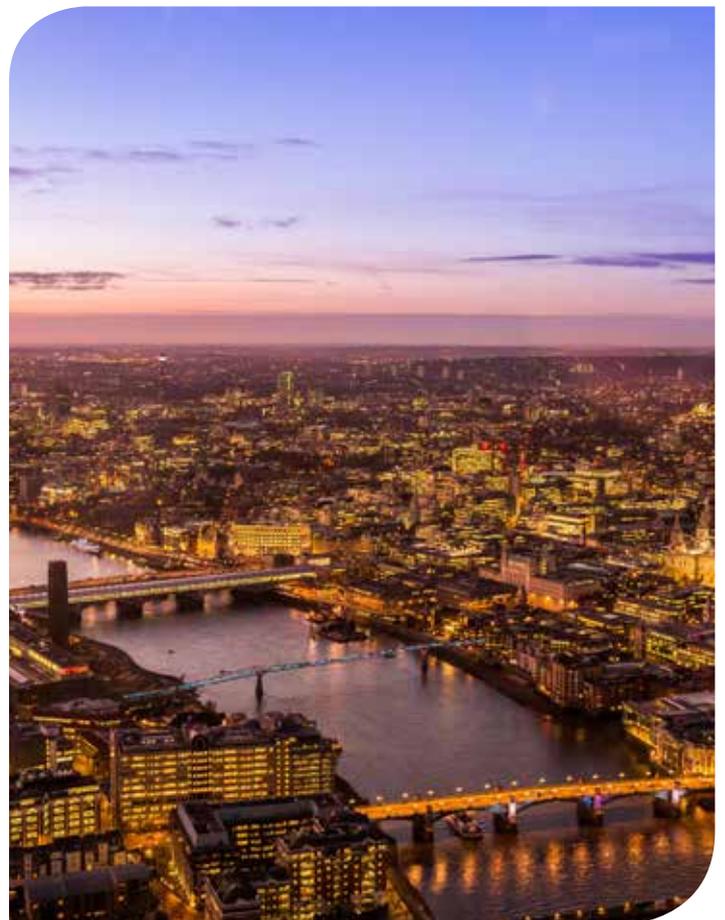
Debating new city regional governance

Directly elected mayors are individual, identifiable political leaders with a secure term of office. Supporters of this model of political leadership argue that it offers a direct link between leaders and electors. This stimulates interest in elections, ensures accountability, and attracts candidates from beyond established political parties. It supports 'place based leadership' by endowing a mayor with considerable power and influence. The mayor has the scope to develop and carry through a long term vision.

Critics respond by arguing that the mayoral model focuses on and overloads an individual. There is little room for opposing voices, and populist, personality politics is the outcome. This all distracts attention from more important issues. Candidates unsuitable for office can be elected, and it can also be difficult to remove an incompetent mayor. Mayors may be indifferent to the views and concerns of electors outside election time.

Perspectives on the key features of the mayoral model are summarised in Box 1.

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) devolution agreement specifies control over £30m a year of new funding over 30 years, plus powers and functions in relation to education and skills, transport, and planning.



Feature of system	Advantages	Disadvantages
Direct election of political leader by citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct link between leader and electors • Increased public interest in elections • Increased visibility for leader • Underpins leadership of place • Draws in candidates from outside established parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on personality • Media driven, populist politics • Potential election of unsuitable candidates • Draws attention away from more fundamental matters
Creates individual, identifiable leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrates power and authority • Facilitates construction of 'vision' • Focus for accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overloads individual actor • Little space for different or opposing voices • Accountability to other actors blunted
Secure term of office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term outlook • Clear process for replacement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifference to electorate between elections • Can be difficult or impossible to remove mayor

Box 1: Advantages and disadvantages of directly elected mayors

Bristol City Council adopted a directly elected mayor in 2012. A report on the introduction of the mayoral model was conducted by the City's universities and published in 2015. It suggested the need to consider: the concentration of power in the mayoral office; ways of including more voices in urban governance; and the creation of an effective strategy for city region governance. These issues will be just as important for WECA, if not more so. There are several key issues that need to be addressed as the West of England mayoralty comes into being (see Box 2 below).

Directly elected mayors have become a key part of the UK Government's 'devolution agenda'. Using a series of 'devolution deals' across the country, the Government has encouraged the creation of metro mayors to oversee Combined Authorities, which have been granted additional powers and responsibilities over and above those of existing local authorities. The focus is on facilitating economic development. Each Combined Authority has taken on a slightly different mix of responsibilities related to education and skills, housing and planning, health and social care, and transport.

Yet many critics have argued that the extent of devolution offered in this process is relatively trivial. Central control over funding and reporting requirements mean that the extra autonomy granted to city regions is extremely constrained.

The issues facing urban areas are much bigger than a narrowly defined economic agenda: they encompass matters such as security, migration, environmental sustainability and climate change. Combined Authorities have powers over housing, planning and transport that could influence local sustainability, but Combined Authorities could benefit from additional policy levers in order to maximise their impact. In addition, the 'new' funding streams allocated to Combined Authorities are insufficient to compensate for massive funding cuts to existing local authorities.

Autonomy, though, if understood as a process of self-determination and independence, is multi-faceted. As well as autonomy 'from' the centre, as granted by devolution, autonomy can be generated locally, drawing on local capacities and capabilities embedded in city networks. Such 'networked autonomy' has gained traction as one of the 'big ideas' from Friends of the Earth, enabling cities to gain control and enhance their power. Moreover, in an influential analysis from Benjamin Barber, mayors have been encouraged to 'rule the world'. Barber argues that city leaders are pragmatic problem solvers: while national governments fail to deliver, cities respond on a daily basis to challenges that are simultaneously global and local. Cities, and stakeholders within them, don't need central government permission to act collaboratively. City leaders can use the resources available to them, both locally and in partnership with other cities, to address the issues they face.

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The West of England Combined Authority

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) comprises the unitary council areas of Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire, with about 908,000 residents. The council leaders and the Mayor of Bristol, plus the new West of England Mayor, are the members of the Combined Authority. The WECA devolution agreement specifies control over £30m a year of new funding over 30 years, plus powers and functions in relation to education and skills, transport, and planning. It may also be agreed at a later date that further powers, either from Central Government or from the constituent authorities, can move to the Combined Authority. In box 2, we summarise key issues for the debate on Metro Mayors.



Question	Issue
<i>How can voters be energised and engaged more effectively to ensure a good turnout on election day?</i>	All directly elected mayors derive their personal mandate from their electorate. Yet, many local people will not be aware that the election for the West of England mayor is imminent.
<i>How will the mayor ensure that other local stakeholders are appropriately included?</i>	The directly elected mayor model explicitly concentrates power: WECA comprises the West of England mayor and only three other members. The danger is that power becomes too concentrated, and decision-making becomes over-centralised.
<i>How can members of the public, community groups and other interests get involved in WECA?</i>	WECA covers an area containing over 900,000 people. In order to maintain support for its activities it needs to connect to people in the area in a more meaningful and frequent way than elections allow.
<i>In what ways will WECA seek to develop autonomy in the city region?</i>	In order to develop autonomy, further powers might be devolved from central government. There are also considerable capacities and capabilities available in the sub-region that can be drawn on and combined to generate networked autonomy.
<i>What is the broader, longer term vision for WECA?</i>	Many issues beyond economic development are on the policy agenda globally for cities, city regions, and communities within them. There are many other problems that WECA might be expected to prioritise, in addition to those for which it is already responsible.

Box 2: Key issues for debate

Further information

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