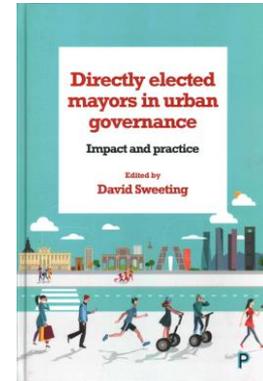


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Directly Elected Mayors in Urban Governance: Impact and Practice edited by David Sweeting



(Policy Press ISBN: 978-1447327011 price £75)
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The introduction of directly elected mayors is one of the most significant recent developments in the structure of governance of the UK. The first mayor of London was elected in 2000, and the model has spread slowly but surely to other cities across the country, with varying powers and parameters attached.

In May 2017 there were elections in six English city-regions for directly elected metro mayors. These new positions as figureheads of combined authorities were a prerequisite of the transfer of powers from Whitehall arranged by George Osborne when he was at the treasury.

Mayoral roles and responsibilities are fairly clearly defined and circumscribed in legislation and the contractual arrangements with government, but there are still plenty of unknowns within what is a novel form of governance and power in the UK. David Sweeting's volume is a timely and useful guide to the issues and argument. It takes a number of the key debates around the salience of directly elected mayors in urban governance and fleshes them out with useful case studies that look in-depth at cities around the world.

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The contributions weigh the various advantages and disadvantages of directly elected mayors and look at arguments as to the relative merits of weak and strong mayors, the increased legitimacy and mandate that comes through election, as well as the crucial issue of having a visible, easily identifiable leader, which was a key reason for their inclusion in recent UK city devolution deals.

The book contains a good analysis of the grey areas in governance that can be exploited by mayors. The power of mayors in the UK in city-regions will be felt through networks of governance, through the informal and soft power that their popular mandate brings, rather than through official institutional and circumscribed forms of hierarchy. Part of a mayor's role as a figurehead is interacting with other parts of government, the public sector and the private sector, for which there are no formal institutional parameters; particularly in this context, personality and individual strengths are likely to play an important part.

Relations between central and local government are a recurring theme, and Sweeting remarks that: "*Directly elected mayors can serve central government's interests as much as local government's interests.*" Headlam and Hepburn situate their contribution, a study of Liverpool, in this context and look at the ways in which Whitehall has used the institution of city mayor to assert its interest.

It does not have to be a zero-sum game, however, and the benefits may well be shared nationally and locally. Indeed, with a weakened government currently in Westminster, mayors may reverse the trend and begin to exert pressure on central government over time.

The contributions to the collection show the various ways in which mayors can operate in urban institutional settings, while responding to these similar cross cutting themes. In the UK context, where directly elected metro mayors have recently assumed office for the first time in combined authority city-regions, we are yet to see the shape these administrations take. A lot has been made so far of the extent of mayoral powers, the cabinet system they operate within, their capacity to lead and convene, and this is yet to play out.

Howard Elcock's contribution highlights the role that mayors play as 'leaders of place'. More than just representatives or party politicians, he argues, mayors can have an impact beyond the institutional structures within which they operate. Indeed several of the analyses here highlight the ways that power and influence can spread through governance networks and civil society throughout the urban area more generally, into communities and business. As leaders of place mayors can become symbols beyond their cities and even beyond their national borders.

There is currently a strong emphasis on urban politics throughout the academic literature on local governance. Though it is outside the remit of this study, one of the big questions that has so far gone unanswered in these debates is the urban/rural divide. The contention that a mayor ‘is not for us’ was one of the stumbling blocks in the abortive attempts by the last government to take the city-regional devolution programme into two-tier, non-urban areas.

Sweeting helps to clarify some of the extant arguments in favour of directly elected mayors in the urban context, and offers interesting examples from around the world. These could be used to bolster city-regional governance in the UK, but they may also carry potential lessons for leaders in other contexts.

Elsewhere, the book shows some of the forms that mayoral governance may take. Although, as Sweeting remarks in his conclusion, the trend, in the UK and elsewhere, does appear to be towards strengthening the formal institutional powers held by mayors. Though in Greater Manchester and other city-regions the concentration of these powers are curtailed by a cabinet system, there is every chance that the influence, profile and mandate invested in one individual through direct election will overshadow the collective. Perhaps softly at first, and it may take a while to manifest, but this volume offers a useful context and tools with which we can analyse the process.

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