

## **Metro-mayors: claims and evidence**

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CURDS has been wrestling with the potentials and perils of decentralised governance in the UK and internationally for many of its 40 years. It is great to have the opportunity to contribute to this timely and important debate, drawing upon ongoing research we have been undertaking within CURDS and as part of an ESRC project on structural economic change, adaptability and the roles of institutions and policy in British cities and the EPSRC and ESRC IBUILD infrastructure research centre work on funding, financing and governing urban infrastructure.

Our argument is that there has been a torrent of hype and hope invested in metro-mayors as a governance fix for the current *ad hoc* and piecemeal episode of decentralisation in England. As claims have run ahead of evidence, the case for metro-mayors risks becoming an article of faith rather than of fact – alternative or otherwise! Clear eyed assessment and reflection is needed on the potential and perils of

metro-mayors to make the most of their emergence and not end up disappointed with devolution in England...again. In England's increasingly diverse and uneven governance landscape, what worth metro-mayors provide relative to other arrangements needs careful scrutiny.

In assessing the brave new world of metro-mayors, it is important to recognise that there are different definitions of mayors internationally with different powers, responsibilities, resources and geographical remits. No single or universal type of mayor exists. This means we have to exercise caution in generalising from selective international evidence and muddling comparison of apples, oranges, and other fruits. This definitional point is particularly important because variation is embedded in the new English metro-mayoralities from the outset as a result of the deal-making that created them and will become ever more evident in the process of their establishment.

Four main claims have been made for metro-mayors. The first is that metro-mayors will facilitate economic growth. They will be visible leaders able to make strategic choices on priorities, exercise power over policy levers and resources for areas including housing, skills and transport, and influence their partners in the public, private and civic sectors.

Presiding over areas with populations ranging from 670k in Tees Valley to 2.8m in the West Midlands, they will be able to advance the economic integration and stimulate the agglomeration economies seen as central to urban economic growth. Yet this argument has not resolved the fundamental problem of isolating and attributing the role of governance institutions and policy in economic growth. After decades of trying, we still find it difficult to identify whether or not there is a causal relationship between forms of governance – including metro-mayors – and economic growth. And, if there is one, what is its direction, extent, nature and magnitude? Do ‘good’ mayors generate economic growth? Or is it economic growth that creates the conditions for ‘good’ mayors? International evidence is mixed and inconclusive. It demonstrates a *variety* of economic outcomes associated with a *variety* of governance arrangements. No convincing evidence supports the contention that metro-mayors in particular and distinct from other forms of governance deliver increased economic growth. Given the scale and nature of the task of closing productivity gaps of over 10% against the UK in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley and the West Midlands, this is a big issue for the new metro-mayors. And this is without examining whether any growth delivered will be of a more socially and spatially inclusive kind.

The second claim is that metro-mayors will provide authoritative and visible leadership, and cut through previously intractable policy problems. A single identifiable and accountable individual holding the metro-mayoral office and wielding its powers and resources will have the mandate and authority to forge a clear strategic direction and carry along key policy partners and the wider citizenry. A clear leader will provide a powerful voice for their area in its dealings with central government. A metro-mayorality will even provide an answer to an English sub-regional version of Henry Kissinger's apocryphal question of "who do I call if I want to talk speak to...?" – Greater Manchester, the Tees Valley or West Midlands. Evidence from around the world of charismatic and high profile mayors is elicited to support this proposition. This claim is bedevilled by lack of clarity on the definition, indicators and evidence for 'leadership'. Too much reliance is placed upon selective, often anecdotal, stories of 'success' associated with mayors working in very different governance arrangements and contexts across the world. Too little attention is given to the negative effects of the concentration of political power in individuals and corruption cases which are also international. Many fear the English versions of metro-mayors are somewhat lightweight, likely to be hamstrung by their underpinning local authorities and unable meaningfully to operate in the UK's highly centralised governance system. While there might well be learning from

international experience for the new metro-mayors in England, the substance of such knowledge needs to be qualified and treated carefully rather than made a central rationale for this form of governance.

A third claim is that metro-mayors will enhance local accountability and democratic engagement. Citizens will become re-engaged in the political process. The direct election of the metro-mayor will improve the connection between the political leader and voters. A closer and more visible relationship will be forged between public policy outcomes and political decision-maker. Another comparison and evidence problem confronts us in assessing this claim. There are no current metro-mayors in England, except the atypical case of London, and large economic and demographic size differences are evident in international cases, for example in US metros. Voter turnout in US mayoral elections has declined precipitously in recent decades. New directly elected mayors in Germany have experienced falling turnouts too. There appear to be only rare improvements in electoral turnout for single local authority directly-elected mayors in the UK. Whether electorates will identify more with a larger functional economic area than a single local authority is a moot point. Against the broader and deeper currents of popular disenchantment and political disengagement, can metro-mayors realistically be expected to turn the tide?

The last main claim is that the mayor will work better at the metropolitan rather than individual local authority scale. A wider geographical remit enables policy co-ordination and integration across a functional economic rather than administrative area. Higher level governance arrangements will facilitate longer-term strategic planning and development. Metropolitan scale metro-politics can rise above lower scale local parochialism. Scrutinising this claim again raises some evidential issues. The relationships between the mayor and public policy outcomes depends upon numerous things such as the urban structure whether monocentric or polycentric, economic and social conditions, and population and governance arrangements in each case. Metro-mayors are comparatively rare internationally making it difficult to evaluate them. Higher growth cities such as Hamburg and San Francisco and 'liveable cities' such as Melbourne, Sydney and Vienna are governed at the city scale not the metro region. Many well-governed metro-regions – such as Lille metropole and Metropolregion München – lack a metro-mayor and are governed through inter-governmental co-operation systems.

Now questioning these claims with evidence does not mean we are wholly against the new metro-mayors in England. Amidst the history of ongoing churn and disruption of different forms and geographies of

decentralised governance in England, a central lesson appears to be take what's on offer, try and make it work, and push towards the next reform. In that spirit of muddling through, the central questions for the new metro-mayors to address and reflect on are: how will you facilitate economic growth? How will you exercise leadership and resolve troublesome policy problems? How will you achieve higher voter turnout and greater accountability? And, last, how will you demonstrate that the office of metro-mayor delivers an improvement on other forms of governance?