Mayors making a difference
An NLGN collection
Edited by Kiran Dhillon
www.nlgn.org.uk
The New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this collection as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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About the authors

Mayor Frank Branston

Frank Branston became Bedford's first directly elected mayor in October 2002. His current term of office ends in May 2007 when he would be eligible for re-election. Prior to becoming Mayor, Frank had been a journalist for most of his working life.

Mayor Steve Bullock

Steve Bullock became Lewisham’s first directly elected mayor in May 2002, having previously been leader of the council during the late 1990s. He has had a twin track career in local government and the NHS, and immediately prior to his election was serving a second term as chair of University Hospital Lewisham.

Mayor Stuart Drummond

Stuart Drummond became Hartlepool’s first directly elected mayor in May 2002 and was re-elected in 2005 with a vastly increased majority of over 10,000. He is Chair of the Safer Hartlepool Partnership and Vice-Chair of the Hartlepool Partnership.

Mayor Mark Meredith

Mark Meredith became Stoke-on-Trent’s second directly elected mayor in May 2005. The first Labour Mayor in the city - his predecessor having been an independent. Mark was born and educated in the area and celebrated his 40th birthday while in office. As a local business man and political activist, Mark has the interests of the City at heart.

Mayor Dorothy Thornhill

Dorothy Thornhill became Watford’s first directly elected mayor in May 2002. She is the only Liberal Democrat mayor, and was the first woman to be elected to such a post. Dorothy previously worked for twenty-five years as a teacher.
Mayor Robin Wales

Mayor Robin Wales became Newham’s first directly elected mayor in May 2002, having been leader of Newham Council since 1995. Sir Robin was awarded a knighthood in 2000 in recognition of his services to local government.

Mayor Martin Winter

Martin Winter became Doncaster’s first directly elected mayor in May 2002 and was re-elected in May 2005. Prior to becoming mayor, Martin was for a number of years the National Training Development Manager for the Royal Society for Nature Conservation.

Kiran Dhillon

Kiran Dhillon joined the New Local Government Network in July 2004, having previously worked for two years in a London local authority. Kiran runs NLGN’s Mayoral Forum, which seeks to understand and disseminate the lessons of directly elected mayors in practice. She also runs NLGN’s local authority Innovation Network, studying local government innovation and linking councils’ experiences at the frontline to national policy debates. Kiran is co-author of the NLGN report Making Community Leadership Real (with Anna Randle, NLGN 2005).
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the authors of the essays that follow for their intellectual contribution to the ongoing debate about elected mayors; and also to those other members of our Mayoral Forum who have on this occasion not contributed.

I also wish to thank former and current colleagues at the New Local Government Network for their support and advice throughout the course of this work, in particular Ian Parker, Anna Randle and Dick Sorabji.

Kiran Dhillon

March 2006
Foreword

Mayor Mark Meredith

As a newly elected Mayor I am delighted that the New Local Government Network has asked me to write the foreword for this exciting new publication.

Stoke-on-Trent is in a unique position as the only local authority in the UK with the Council Manager/elected mayor system of governance. This has proved to be very unpopular with councillors who feel completely excluded from the decision-making processes. A referendum has been promised in 2007 and it may well be that a change in management arrangements will follow. Whatever system is chosen however, no changes will be effective until 2009.

My life has not been made easy by the fact that 59 of the 60 Councillors are fundamentally opposed to the model of management in the City. Outside of the Council there is a considerable confusion between the role of the Lord Mayor (i.e. the Civic Head of the Council) and the elected Mayor. I am regularly asked where my car and chain of office has been left. Protocol is also very sensitive, making sure that I take my “rightful” place in the Civic Hierarchy is vital given the number of people I would offend by getting it wrong! There is also a serious issue about resources for a mayoral office. Staffing and modern equipment remain an issue and an almost continuous battle.

Just over six months in to my new role, I am starting to see the possibilities and limitations of the position. The Budget process for the forthcoming year has certainly thrown up some difficulties; whereas at the same time, I can see real benefits from properly targeted regeneration in the city. I am not convinced that I was initially prepared for everything that was thrown at me. Finding a proper work/life balance is also difficult and I am having to learn to say “no” more often.

Mayors elsewhere have been incredibly successful. Earlier research suggested that in most mayoral authorities, most people knew they had an elected mayor, knew their name and clearly identified the Mayor as the person who ran the local council. With further evidence emerging that this is true (see Steve Bullock’s essay in this collection), this is one of the clearest benefits of the system – one individual is held accountable in the eyes of the electorate for the decisions which most affect their lives.
Partner organisations also welcome the mayoral position and this has been very much the case in Stoke-on-Trent. Regeneration has been extremely successful over the last few months. With a Mayor promoting the city and bringing the agencies together, considerable funds and expertise has been brought in.

This is an exciting time for local government, there are many changes posed for all elected politicians but elected mayors are in the vanguard of these. The Local Government White Paper due to be published later this year will, I hope, define more clearly the powers and role of elected mayors.

For the Mayoral model adopted by Stoke-on-Trent to be successful there needs to be a good relationship between the Mayor and Council Manager – based on honesty, trust and a commitment from both, to the delivery of excellent services. The relationship is however, not one of equals – ultimately, the Council Manager makes the decisions and the Mayor gives political and policy advice. It is a democratic deficit which must be addressed.

My belief is that mayoral systems, in whatever form are here to stay – it is up to the office holders to ensure that they make the best of the benefits for their electorate.
1 Introduction: elected mayors – the direction of travel

Kiran Dhillon

For almost a decade, the idea of directly elected mayors has been much debated across local government in England. Enthusiasts of the mayoral system, optimistic that the idea of mayors would take off, have consistently argued that it can revive local democracy through strengthened leadership, accountability, public engagement and quicker decision-making.

In 2004, two years after the first handful of local authority mayors were elected, NLGN published a report evaluating the early lessons. In doing so, we helped move the debate beyond the earlier ideological stand-off to an evidence-based assessment of what the mayoral model – as opposed to individual mayors – had delivered up to that point. The report, which received widespread attention, concluded that the mayoral model was progressing well.  

Polling carried out in 2003 (and referred to in the NLGN report) revealed that on average, elected mayors were at that point known to 57% of local people – over double the percentage of a council leader. In the North East, where three of the original mayors were elected, this figure rose to 73% and was still 26% in London where the three borough mayors were struggling with weak local media and some confusion with the Mayor of London.

While it was too early to judge the long-term impact of mayors on service delivery, the services on which they had focussed – particularly liveability and street scene – had improved. No mayoral council had slid down the Comprehensive Performance Assessment table, in fact several climbed up. There were also signs that elected mayors were offering a new form of community leadership. Mayors described themselves as ‘mayor of the town’ rather than of the council, and sought to influence agendas beyond the direct remit of the authority. Many of the mayors sought a consensual approach, seeking to engage with local agencies.

In short, the NLGN report concluded that there were many areas where mayors were making a difference: services were improving; there were high levels of recognition amongst local citizens and mayors were developing new relationships with local partners.

At around the same time, NLGN also published a collection of essays on the governance of London, in which many of the contributors welcomed the emergence of a Mayor for London. The mayor was seen as providing a focus for key stakeholders in the capital; as well as a general feeling that the position gave London a strong figurehead, advocate and ambassador, who strengthened its ability to compete with major cities around the world. In terms of profile meanwhile, a team from MORI writing in the collection, noted how Ken Livingstone had an 81% recognition rating among Londoners as the Mayor.

While it is true that there are currently only thirteen elected mayors (Livingstone plus a dozen local authority mayors), they are very much part of the new political landscape in England. More importantly however, there is now a fresh political impetus to explore their potential. Supportive comments have been voiced by the new leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron. Meanwhile, in its 2005 General Election manifesto the Labour Party offered the following promise:

‘We will explore giving people a more direct opportunity to express a view about whether they would like to have a directly elected mayor. We will also consult with city councils on the powers needed for a new generation of city mayors’.

The debate about elected mayors also feeds into wider debates about local governance. Whether considering neighbourhoods, unitarisation or leadership, we are ultimately trying to answer a question about what we want our local governance system to deliver.

The fundamental principle underpinning these discussions is that our local governance system should deliver strong, accountable, visible and responsive leadership. It should be capable of delivering improvements in our localities by

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4 See for example, news coverage of speech by Rt Hon David Cameron MP to Crime Concern audience The Guardian, 16 January 2006

offering a vision for the area. In doing so, it should be pulling local partners together to deliver joined-up services, attracting inward investment and driving economic development, and listening to the demands of citizens. We are therefore, looking for a governance system capable of delivering excellent services and re-engaging people with political institutions.

Any form of organising local democracy will carry certain benefits and drawbacks, opportunities and risks. And so we must be aware of the question we are seeking to answer when considering local government reform. This then allows us to weigh up the relative benefits and drawbacks of each approach. Directly elected mayors can provide one piece of the local governance jigsaw. Last year’s ‘local:vision’ document on the future of local leadership, published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister identified their potential:

‘Mayors can provide a focus for public engagement and bringing partners together. The fact that mayors have the unique mandate of being a single individual elected by citizens from across the locality as a whole reinforces their legitimacy and can enhance their ability to act as a leader of the entire community, to bring partners together and to shape services and outcomes well beyond the immediate responsibilities of the council.’

While it is too early to draw definite conclusions, the current collection of essays revisits some of the debates about the possibilities of the mayoral system and – with the benefit of the experiences of the early pioneers – illustrates what it is capable of delivering. As a form of political leadership what merits and advantages does it have over the council leader/cabinet model? And what can we learn from the mayoral system that can inform broader debates about local government reform?

The essays that follow give a number of the current crop of elected mayors a chance to offer their views on how mayoral governance has had a real impact on their local areas. The authors cover a range of areas, focusing on some key features of the mayoral system, including public engagement, and the ability to attract inward investment and promote economic development.

Watford mayor Dorothy Thornhill discusses how despite her initial opposition to the idea of directly elected mayors, she now believes they are a route to

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enhancing local democracy, through their visibility and accountability. Hartlepool mayor Stuart Drummond agrees with this assertion and believes that mayors are high profile community leaders, capable of connecting the public with local government. Meanwhile, Lewisham mayor Steve Bullock discusses how mayoral governance has provided him with opportunities to reach out to the public and local partners.

As well as delivering responsive and visible leadership, mayoral governance can also deliver tangible improvements in localities. Bedford mayor Frank Branston describes how he has set about regenerating his borough, while Doncaster mayor Martin Winter discusses his success in the area of economic development. Finally, Newham mayor Robin Wales focuses on how mayoral governance has been key to tackling local problems of anti-social behaviour.

In the round, the authors reveal that there are definite benefits to the mayoral system. The current incumbents – including those not contributing to this collection – are seizing the community leadership role; providing a vision for the area; representing and acting as ambassadors for their localities; attracting investment; using their mandate to bring local partners together; and providing a clear focus for citizen engagement. In doing so, they not only enhance local democracy but ensure better and more responsive services for local residents.

The question for NLGN and others, therefore, is what can we learn from actual existing mayoral governance in the UK? The experience of the local authority mayors and that of Ken Livingstone in London, does offer some food for thought about the future of the model and the scope for city mayors, or indeed city region mayors. It also allows us to consider how these lessons might be applicable to a system of directly elected cabinets? Reflections on some of these questions are given in the concluding chapter.
Seeing the Light? Next Steps for City Regions

The final report of NLGN’s City Regions Commission

City regions are high up on the UK policy agenda, with the potential to drive economic development and enable institutions to work in ways that reflect contemporary lifestyle patterns.

NLGN established a ‘City Regions Commission’ to investigate further the prospects for the UK adopting such governance arrangements, particularly in England. Its final report (published in December 2005) concludes that the best way forward for city regions is through local authority confederations, developed organically and incrementally through local context and knowledge.

Mayors Mid-term: lessons from the first eighteen months of directly elected mayors

Anna Randle

The introduction of elected mayors was one of the more controversial aspects of New Labour’s modernisation agenda for local government. NLGN was involved in the debate right from the start, and the lessons learnt in this seminal report (published in Spring 2004) were an early assessment of the mayoral system in practice.

Drawing on evidence from the mayoral authorities, as well as opinion polling on mayors, this seminal report reflected on the many positive signs and challenges emerging.

These publications are free to download in PDF format
Also available from NLGN

What is local government for?
Refocusing local governance to meet the challenges of the 21st century

Professor Gerry Stoker

ISBN 1 903447 46 1 · £10 (1-19 copies) or £7 (20+ copies) p&p

For people in England to be convinced of the value of power being devolved to their communities, they need a local governance system that delivers something other than the ‘same again’ style politics that often passes them by. They need to feel confident that the local institutions they elect really do control what truly matters locally – transport and mobility, employability, crime and safety, management of the environment, healthy lifestyles, and community cohesion.

What is local government for? offers a new model of local governance in England that meets the challenges of the 21st Century. The author, a key architect of the New Localism agenda long advocated by NLGN, does so by reconsidering the purposes, functions and powers of local government, complete with new structures of governance at the strategic and neighbourhood levels. In doing so, a way forward is offered for a more accountable and engaging system of local politics.

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With a resurgence in support for directly elected mayors as a way of running UK local authorities, the dozen already in post provide a small but useful sample through which to learn about the impact of the model.

The New Local Government Network has long followed the progress of the agenda for almost a decade, and in recent years worked closely with those authorities that went down the mayoral route.

*Mayors making a difference* includes essays from six of the mayors, along with a foreword from the only current city mayor outside of London, and some fresh evidence-based analysis from NLGN.

The collection examines how mayoral governance has made a difference locally, covering a range of areas from the impact of mayors on public engagement to their ability to attract inward investment and promote economic development. It also considers the future of the model and what lessons might be applied to a system of directly elected cabinets, and also city region arrangements.