

# Local Heroes:

Why Scotland Needs Directly-Elected  
Mayors

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## **About Reform Scotland**

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Reform Scotland, a charity registered in Scotland, is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity, opportunity for all, and more effective public services. Reform Scotland is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. Its Director is Chris Deerin and Alison Payne is the Research Director. Both work closely with the Trustee Board, chaired by Alan McFarlane, which meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

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## **Scottish Policy Foundation**

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## CONTEXT

All too often the constitutional debate in Scotland fixates on the relationship between Westminster and Holyrood. However this overlooks the importance of local government.

It is 27 years since local government reorganisation, 23 years since the Scotland Act, and 14 years since the first proportional council elections, yet there has been no review of the capabilities or structures of local government in Scotland.

Instead, power has been hoarded in Edinburgh rather than London. While greater powers have been devolved to Holyrood, there has been no devolution onwards to local government - arguably the reverse has happened through policies such as council tax caps.

In its centralising behaviour, the current Scottish Government is only continuing a trend that has existed for many years. As Andy Wightman MSP noted in the Policy Memorandum to his European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill:

*“over the past century the status, powers and freedoms of local government have been slowly eroded and marginalised. Governments of all persuasions have tended to concentrate more executive and fiscal power to the centre.”*

It is past time for a major rethink, and for the genuine empowerment of Scotland’s councils. This should be a priority for the next government and Reform Scotland hopes this report can stimulate a much-needed debate.

Reform Scotland first called for the devolution of greater tax powers to local government, as well as the introduction of mayors, in our 2008 report [Local Power](#).

Today, we believe that local authorities must be given the tools and structures they need to help both the communities they serve and wider Scotland along the current, difficult road to economic recovery. Even before the damage wreaked by the Covid pandemic, our villages, towns and cities faced hugely varied challenges. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the economic impact of the virus is being felt differently around the country. Different local and regional challenges require different local and regional solutions.

An executive directly-elected mayor working with a proportionally representative council offers an opportunity for less secrecy, more accountability and genuine scrutiny. However, mayors are not just about city management, but city representation.

We believe that a single, elected figurehead can make a real difference, providing greater accountability as well as enhanced popular focus on and understanding of local government. The lessons of the past year show that

City and Metro Mayors in England were able to take effective action in securing help from the UK Government to deal with the challenging circumstances they were facing.

Greater powers alongside a strengthened identity can help create the muscular, empowered and accountable local authorities Scotland needs.

It is clear that the Scottish Government sees merit in devolving greater fiscal power from Westminster to Edinburgh, and Reform Scotland agrees that this needs to happen. However, those arguments also apply to devolution from Holyrood to councils.

We shouldn't accept a Holyrood-centric view of Scotland. To paraphrase Andy Burnham<sup>1</sup>, too many decisions are made without a proper understanding of the role our cities and regions play in producing the prosperity and innovation which will power Scotland's future

We therefore urge the Scottish Government to take the necessary steps to strengthen the vital role of local democracy in Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> In a press release from Liam Byrne for West Midlands Mayor on 17 March 2021, Andy Burnham commented “We won't accept a London-centric view of regional government. Too many decisions are made without a proper understanding of the role our big city regions make in producing the prosperity and innovation which will power our economic future”

## BACKGROUND

### Local government structure in Scotland

Scotland's current unitary system of local government dates back to the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994, which abolished the previous nine regional and 53 district councils, replacing them with the existing 32 local authorities.

These councils vary greatly in terms of their area population and geographic size; the number of councillors elected; and the socio-economic circumstances they face.

The introduction of the Single Transferable Vote system for electing councillors at the 2007 local government elections ended single-party rule in most councils, with most now governed by coalitions. As a result, some councils have "co-leaders", where a representative of each party in the coalition shares the leader role. For example, in Aberdeen, Labour councillor Jenny Laing and Conservative councillor Douglas Lumsden share the job of council leader. Similarly in Fife, Labour Councillor David Ross and SNP Councillor David Alexander are co-leaders.

Councils are able to adopt different types of decision-making and scrutiny processes. The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 allows local authorities to devolve most decision-making to committees.<sup>2</sup>

However, other councils have opted to adopt more of an executive structure, with decisions made by an executive committee and through the use of scrutiny committees.

### Expenditure

According to Government Expenditure and Revenue, £81 billion was spent in Scotland in 2019/20. Of this, £15.6 billion, or 19%, was spent by local authorities.<sup>3</sup> This is not an insignificant amount of money and covers key services such as education, social work, waste and roads.

### Engagement

One of the Scottish Government's 81 National Performance Indicators measures the percentage of respondents who agree with the statement "*I can influence decisions affecting my local area*". In 2019 only 17.8% of respondents agreed. This was a drop from 23% in 2014, itself already a low level, and the lowest level since the metric was first measured in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marsh, R, 'How do local authorities make decisions', SPICe, 2013:

[https://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB\\_13-85.pdf](https://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB_13-85.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/government-expenditure-revenue-scotland-gers-2019-20/pages/5/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/measuring-progress/national-indicator-performance>

The last local government elections in Scotland were held on 4 May 2017. The turnout, including rejected ballots, was 46.9%.<sup>5</sup> This compares with a turnout of 55.6% at the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016 (55.8% on the regional ballot)<sup>6</sup> and 68.1% turnout in Scotland at the 2019 Westminster elections.

Although turnout at the 2017 local elections was up on the 39.7% in 2012, it was lower than the 52.8% in 2007, when they were held on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections.<sup>7</sup> There was only one election to the current 32 local councils prior to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. That was in 1995 and the turnout was 44.9%.<sup>8</sup>

### More voices

Scotland needs more voices. Increasing tribalism along constitutional and party lines means few politicians deviate from the official line, and there has arguably been a consequent decline in debate and ideas in Scotland. Mayors, accountable to the council area that elected them, can be fresh, high-profile and distinctive voices. Policies are felt differently around the country, and it is important this diversity is clearly heard and understood.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB12-38.pdf><https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefings/Report/2017/5/19/Local-government-elections-2017-1-1>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S5/SB\\_16-34\\_Election\\_2016.pdf](https://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S5/SB_16-34_Election_2016.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB12-38.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.electionscentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Scottish-Council-Elections-1995.pdf>

## Case Studies – different mayoral models

### London

The Mayor and the Greater London Assembly (GLA) provide a regional tier of governance above the 32 London Borough councils and the City of London. In four areas of London there are two directly-elected mayors representing residents – the Borough Council Mayor and the London Mayor.

- Borough Councils

These councils provide the majority of day-to-day services for residents, including education, housing, social services, environmental services, local planning and many arts and leisure services. They are similar to local authorities in Scotland.

Although London's two-tier governance model has some similarities with Scotland, London borough councils get their funding directly from central government, not from the GLA.

The councils adopt either a leader and cabinet structure, or a directly-elected mayor and cabinet. Currently only four councils have the latter – Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets.<sup>9</sup> These directly-elected mayors have overall responsibility for council policy and the delivery of services. They appoint a cabinet from among the elected councillors. The council holds the mayor to account and the full council decides the budget and annual plans for key services.<sup>10</sup>

The councils are responsible for council tax, but the bills also include a precept for the GLA.<sup>11</sup>

- The Mayor of London

The Mayor of London has a duty to develop strategies on air quality, biodiversity, culture and tourism, economic development, transport, waste and spatial development.<sup>12</sup> Other priorities include higher education, foreign investment and attracting events and conferences to London.

The Mayor also sets an annual budget for the GLA, which includes Transport for London, the Metropolitan Police and the London Fire Brigade.<sup>13</sup>

Sadiq Khan is the current mayor and executive of the GLA. Primary decision-making rests with the mayor, who is required by law to take many decisions personally – for example, non-routine and programme decisions with a value of more than £150,000.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/who-runs-london/essential-guide-london-local-government>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/who-runs-london/london-elections/elected-mayors>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/our-key-themes/local-government-finance/local-taxation-council-tax-and-business-rates/council-tax#:~:text=Council%20Tax%20in%20London,to%20hold%20a%20local%20referendum.>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/who-runs-london/essential-guide-london-local-government>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/mayor-london/mayor-and-his-team/role-mayor-london>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/governance-and-spending/good-governance/decision-making>

- Greater London Assembly

The Greater London Assembly (GLA) is made up of 25 members, elected at the same time as the mayor. Eleven represent the whole Greater London area, while 14 represent constituencies. It is the job of the Assembly to hold the mayor to account. The mayor's policies are examined through committee meetings, plenary sessions, site visits and investigations. The Assembly also questions the Mayor ten times a year at Mayor's Question Time.<sup>15</sup>

The mayor's role is an executive one, while the GLA acts as scrutineer. The GLA also has the power to approve or amend the mayor's budget, to reject some policies and to offer its own ideas.

### **Greater Manchester Combined Authority**

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) is made up of the leaders of the ten Greater Manchester councils (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan) along with the mayor, who is the eleventh member and chair.

The councils had previously worked together voluntarily on regional issues such as transport and regeneration. The 2014 Devolution Agreement<sup>16</sup> gave the region more powers and responsibilities through an elected mayor. There have now been six devolution deals, which have seen greater powers passed to the GMCA<sup>17</sup>:

- Nov '14: Powers in relation to transport, business support, employment and adult education, spatial planning, crime and policing, housing investment.
- Feb '15: Health and social care.
- July '15: Fundament review of service for children, creation of Greater Manchester Land Commission, transfer of fire and rescue responsibilities.
- Nov '15: Further transport devolution, social housing reform, control of EU funding.
- Mar '16: Establishment of Greater Manchester Life Chances Fund, criminal justice devolution, business rates retention.
- Nov '17: Homelessness funding, additional transport funding, local industrial strategy.

Andy Burnham is the current mayor of the GMCA. He is able to make some decisions independently, but others involve consultation with and approval from all 11 members of the authority. Some decisions need unanimous support, others need a majority.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, the GMCA mayoral role ranges from setting budgets and priorities to acting as an ambassador for the region.

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/about-london-assembly>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/who-we-are/devolution/>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/who-we-are/devolution/>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/the-mayor/>

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These examples of prominent mayors within the UK illustrate how accountability and scrutiny of mayors can work, but, as with most mayoralties covering combined authorities, aren't necessarily appropriate for Scotland. The following international examples illustrate how mayors can work alongside a single local council area.

### **Auckland mayor and council**

Auckland council is a unitary authority with a directly-elected mayor, who acts as leader of the council, or 'Governing Body'.<sup>19</sup> The mayor is also a member of the Governing Body, along with 20 ward councillors, can participate in votes and holds a casting vote.

Phil Groff is the current mayor of Auckland. The 'Governance Manual' for the council describes the mayor as "the council's principal representative to the public", and "first among equals".

The duties of the mayor are set out in legislation, which states that the foremost role is to articulate and promote a vision for Auckland, and to provide leadership to achieve objectives that will contribute to that vision.

The mayor leads the development of the council's plans, policies and budgets for consideration by the Governing Body

The mayor may also use their leadership role and procedural powers as chair of the Governing Body to influence the council's plans, policies and budgets. However, the mayor does not have executive powers to make these decisions instead of the Governing Body, nor the power to veto Governing Body decisions.<sup>20</sup>

The mayor is arguably similar to Scottish council leaders in terms of being "first among equals" and an active member of the council. However, the mayor of Auckland holds a direct mandate from the whole area, not just one ward, and so is more directly accountable to the electorate and the local community than colleagues.

### **Minneapolis mayor and council**

With a population of roughly 440,000, the city of Minneapolis has a smaller population than Edinburgh and at 54 square miles covers an area roughly the size of Clackmannanshire.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://governance.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/media/1108/20210111-governance-manual-section-4-the-mayor-of-auckland-final.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://governance.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/4-the-mayor-of-auckland/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-local-government-financial-statistics-2010-11/>

On 25 May 2020 George Floyd was killed by police during an arrest in Minneapolis. One of four officers knelt on his neck for nearly seven minutes during his arrest. During this time Floyd reportedly said numerous times that he could not breathe.<sup>22</sup>

As well as prompting huge national and international demonstrations in favour of Black Lives Matter and against police brutality, the incident and subsequent campaign also highlighted a debate about the funding of the police.

In Minneapolis, the city government has a council and mayor which work together to implement policies and pass budgets, and the debate around the 2021 budget following George Floyd's killing illustrates that joint-working.<sup>23</sup>

The 2021 budget cut \$19m from the \$179 million policing budget. This included \$8 million in direct cuts to the police department, with the other \$11 million put in a reserve account for which the Police Chief requires council approval before use.<sup>24</sup>

The council had originally wanted to reduce the number of officers from 888 to 750, but the mayor, Jacob Frey, had threatened to veto the budget if that measure was approved.<sup>25</sup> The final budget agreement retained the officer numbers as they were.

The council has 13 wards, each electing one member under the Single Transferable Vote system. It has a president, who presides over meetings, manages the agenda and appoints members to committees.<sup>26</sup>

Of the 13 council members, 12 represent the Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor party, with the other council member coming from the Green Party. Frey, the current mayor, is a former council member and also represents the Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor party.<sup>27</sup>

### **Board of Mayor and Aldermen for Manchester, New Hampshire**

The population of Manchester, New Hampshire, is about 113,000, covering an area of about 33.1 square miles, making it not too dissimilar in terms of size and population to Dundee.<sup>28</sup>

The Board of Mayor and Aldermen is the legislative body of the City of Manchester, and members are elected every two years. The Board consists of a directly-elected mayor and fourteen aldermen, twelve of whom represent individual wards and two of whom are directly elected by the

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52861726>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.minneapolismn.gov/government/city-council/about-city-council/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/US/minneapolis-city-council-approves-police-budget-cuts-months/story?id=74643667>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/10/us/minneapolis-police-funding.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.minneapolismn.gov/government/city-council/about-city-council/council-leadership/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.minneapolismn.gov/government/mayor/about-the-mayor/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/manchestercitynewhampshire/PST045219>

whole council area. As the governing body, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (BMA) sets law and policies for the city.<sup>29</sup>

The current mayor, and first woman to hold the post, Joyce Craig, served as an alderman prior to becoming mayor.<sup>30</sup>

As well as acting as Presiding Officer of the board and holding the tie vote, the administrative and executive powers of the city rest with the mayor. In terms of finance, the mayor has the power to establish a budget format; review all departmental budgetary requests; and make recommendations to the board of aldermen regarding financial policies, appropriation resolutions and revenues.

The mayor can also veto any decision from the board of aldermen. The veto requires a two-thirds vote by the elected aldermen to overturn it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.manchesternh.gov/Government>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.manchesternh.gov/Government/Mayor-and-Aldermen/Mayors-Office>

<sup>31</sup> [https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/manchester/latest/manchester\\_nh/0-0-0-6264](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/manchester/latest/manchester_nh/0-0-0-6264)

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Scotland needs a new and better balance of powers between Holyrood and local government. This requires a shift away from central command and control. We believe that the following policy recommendations would help deliver such a change:

### Directly-elected mayors

One of the problems with local government is that often the electorate doesn't know who is in charge. Since the advent of STV for council elections, most are now run by coalitions and there isn't always a great deal of voter recognition for council leaders.

Occasionally an issue may result in a council leader becoming more prominent - for example, Edinburgh Council leader Adam McVey gained greater prominence due to the tourism-tax debate with the Scottish Government.

However, even then a council leader can be viewed as a lower-level politician, as opposed to occupying a prestigious role running a city. Backbench MSPs have higher salaries than the council leaders running Scotland's councils, including Edinburgh and Glasgow.<sup>32</sup>

The advantage of having a directly-elected leader is that it provides a clear figurehead and so can provide dynamism and strengthen accountability and debate. As seen in mayoral elections in England in areas such as London, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, as well as giving those areas a greater voice mayors can also stimulate the electorate's interest in and awareness of local government.

Mayors can provide strong and effective leadership. In terms of cities they can be a powerful force in driving economic development and progress, while in suburban or more rural areas they can ensure their community is not overlooked.

The mayor should be directly elected by the public across the whole council area, giving them a strong democratic mandate. We would suggest that the mayor is elected at the same time as the council. The mayor would perform the executive role and would be able to appoint councillors to portfolio areas.

As well as the usual council management role, the key differences between the new mayor and the existing council leaders would be:

- The mayor would be directly elected across the whole council area, with direct accountability to the local population rather than just to party colleagues and voters in a single ward.

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<sup>32</sup>An MSP's basic salary is £64,470 as at 1 April 2020:

[https://www.parliament.scot/StaffAndManagementResources/MSP\\_and\\_Officeholder\\_salaries\\_as\\_at\\_1\\_April\\_2020.pdf](https://www.parliament.scot/StaffAndManagementResources/MSP_and_Officeholder_salaries_as_at_1_April_2020.pdf). The salary of the leaders of Glasgow and Edinburgh as at April 2020 was £53,567: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/local-government/councillors-roles-conduct-pay/>

- The mayor would play a bigger role in terms of representing the area at Holyrood, Westminster and internationally. They would be the people's representative, rather than a party's representative to the people.

There is also an opportunity to use the role of the mayor to reinject some localism into policing and healthcare. For example, the mayor could be an influential local representative on health boards.

The main job of the council would be to hold the mayor to account and to provide scrutiny. Agreement would be needed to pass the budget with the mayor and council working together. This balance should improve accountability and transparency.

### **'Mayor' vs 'Provost'**

Historically, Scotland has tended to have "provosts" as opposed to "mayors". However, as most councils currently already have provosts - largely ceremonial posts - this is not what we envisage for this executive position, and so we have referred to the role as a mayor. The structure would still require the ceremonial/presiding officer-style role, which could continue to be performed by a provost.

### **Full devolution of local taxes**

Scotland's "local" taxes are local in name only and properly devolving them to councils would help Scotland along the road to economic recovery as well as equipping local areas to deal in their own ways with the consequences of Covid.

Even before the pandemic councils across Scotland faced hugely different challenges, so it is therefore unsurprising that the impact of the virus is being felt differently across the country. Local authorities need the tools to respond as they see fit. The Scottish Government's economic briefing for June 2020 looked at regional exposure and resilience in the labour market across Scotland.<sup>33</sup> It highlighted that local authorities that are rural or mainly rural have slightly higher shares of jobs in the most-exposed sectors. However, the overall number of jobs in the most-exposed sectors is highest in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Fife.

While central government can act quickly, reaching large numbers of people directly, local authorities can fine-tune their recovery plans to suit their differing and distinctive strengths and weaknesses. Under the current settlement, councils have both hands tied behind their back. Scotland is far too centralised and this needs to change.

Non-domestic rates should be devolved to local authorities in full. This would allow them to vary how and to whom the tax applies based on their own

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/monthly-economic-brief-2/pages/5/>

circumstances. It would also ensure that non-domestic rates are the genuinely local tax they are supposed to be. An increase in local financial autonomy and accountability is more likely to give councils an incentive to design business taxation policies and broader local economic development strategies to support the growth of local businesses, encourage start-ups and attract businesses to invest, since this will benefit the council directly by increasing its income from business taxes. Passing control of business rates to local authorities would also mean giving them control over business rates relief schemes. As a result, it would be up to each individual local authority how the tax operated within their area.

We are aware that if business rates were simply devolved some councils could be worse off, due to the re-distribution of income that occurs centrally. However, it is possible to re-adjust the block grant to ensure that in Year 1 no council loses out, creating an equivalent of the fiscal framework that could be used for local authorities.

Just like business rates, council tax is a largely a local tax in name only. Although the freeze was lifted, increases were then capped by the Scottish Government. Again, this has tied the hands of local government as well as obscuring accountability and transparency.

We are, however, concerned about simply replacing one centrally controlled tax with an alternative centrally controlled tax.

Reform Scotland believes that local authorities should have complete control over their local tax - including the rates, bands and indeed form of the tax. This would allow individual councils, should they choose, to retain, reform or replace council tax with another form of local taxation. Crucially, this would be a decision about a local tax made by a local authority for its local area, taking into account local circumstances and priorities. A true local tax.

