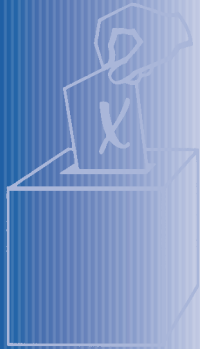




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## LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PROGRAMME



# Research Summary

## Survey of Public Attitudes to Directly Elected Mayors

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### Introduction

Fundamental to the modernisation of local councils is the introduction of new constitutions intended to provide the efficiency, transparency and accountability considered lacking in the committee system. The legislative change introducing these new constitutions, Part II of the Local Government Act 2000, covers four broad forms of constitution: leader and cabinet; mayor and cabinet; mayor and council manager; and alternative arrangements.

In July 2001, the Department commissioned IFF Research Ltd (an independent market research company) to undertake telephone surveys of representative random samples of the public in ten local authority areas across the country (three 'core' cities, two London boroughs and three 'secondary' cities). In total, approximately 1,100 interviews were achieved in each city or large town providing a reasonably high level of statistical reliability.

The report presents information on the basic analysis of responses to the survey and, in particular, residents' attitudes to their local authority, voting and present and potential political leadership. A key issue in this report is attitudes to directly elected mayors; the difference people think such a person might make to the way things are run in their area and to their involvement in the political process.

### Deciding who is the Leading Councillor

The majority of respondents would prefer the decision on who is the leading councillor in their town or city to be made by the public rather than by existing councillors. In nine of the ten authority areas surveyed, more than seven out of ten respondents would prefer this approach. On average across all ten authorities, three-quarters of all respondents (75.0%) agreed that the decision on who was the leading councillor should be made through an election in which everyone in their city or town can vote. One in five (21.0%) overall would prefer the choice to be made by existing elected councillors.

The data suggest that the preference for directly electing the leading councillor although high for all age groups, declines somewhat with higher age groups and amongst those in the highest socio-economic groups. Specifically, of those aged over 54 years around 70% favour a public choice on who is the leading councillor whereas among those 18 to 34 years, the figure is approaching 80%. Similarly, support for a public choice is lower, the higher the socio-economic group respondents are classified as.

Respondents with less favourable views of their town or city councillors and the council in general are more likely to favour

a public decision on who is the leading councillor than leaving this decision up to existing councillors. This is illustrated by the fact that 79% of those who agree the ‘councillors lose touch with people pretty quickly’ would prefer a public vote on the leading councillor and 68% of those who disagree with that statement would prefer a public vote. On average, an additional 8.7% of respondents who are dissatisfied with the way their council runs things favour a public choice compared to those who are ‘satisfied’.

The survey also suggests that those who are most satisfied with the opportunities to express a view on decision making arrangements are less likely to favour a public choice to decide the leading councillor (68.6% of those who are satisfied with opportunities to some extent favour a public vote compared to the overall average of 75.0%).

## Views on Directly Elected Mayors

Respondents agree with ‘positive’ statements about directly elected mayors above all ‘negative’ statements. In particular, almost eight out of ten respondents (78.3%) agree that a directly elected mayor might be someone who could speak up for the whole area. Around two thirds of all respondents agreed that a directly elected mayor would make it easier to get things done (65.3%) and make it clear who was responsible when things go wrong (66.3%). Moreover, well over half of all respondents (58.3%) agreed that it would make local politics more interesting.

The greatest concern about directly elected mayors (agreed by 45.5% of respondents on average) is that the position might give too much power to one person. Around a third of respondents (32.5%) agreed that the change might lead to a council tax rise but only around one in eight respondents (12.4%) had concerns that local services might worsen. Just over a third of respondents on average (34.7%) also had some concerns that other local councillors would have too little to say if there was a directly elected mayor.

It would seem that older respondents are more concerned that the introduction of a mayor might have negative consequences. For example, 39.2% of those aged 65 and over disagree or strongly disagree that having a directly elected mayor might give too much power to one person, whereas exactly half of respondents between 18 and 24 disagree with this.

## Voting Behaviour

Across all surveys on the issue, respondents generally over-report intention to vote and voting. These surveys appear no different. On average, approaching two-thirds of residents (64.1%) across the ten towns and cities claim to have voted in the last local election in their ward. In most of the authority areas, 60% to 70% of respondents claim to have voted. This is likely to be at around double actual turnout.

### MAYORAL ELECTION

Just under half of all respondents (49.6%) indicated that it was ‘very likely’ that they would go out and vote for mayor if a mayoral election was held in their town or city tomorrow and just over a quarter (25.7%) indicated it was ‘fairly’ likely.

Those residents that have lived in the area for a longer time (over 5 years) are more likely to have both voted in the last local elections and to report that they would vote in a mayoral election. Inevitably, length of residency is linked to age and this was a finding in relation to older age groups. There seems to be a close relationship between the level of interest in local politics and the likelihood of voting in a mayoral election, should one be held: 72.8 % of respondents who claim a ‘great deal’ of interest in local politics would also be ‘very likely’ to vote in a mayoral election, compared with only 29.6% of those who have no interest in local politics at all.

Approaching a third of all respondents (30.7%) indicated that they would be *more* likely to vote in an election for a mayor for their city or town than in an election for their local councillor. However, the majority (54.2% on average) suggest it would make no difference.

### REFERENDUMS

Over half of all respondents claim it is ‘very likely’ they would vote in a mayoral referendum in their town or city. Overall, combining the average percentage ‘very likely’ to vote and ‘fairly likely’ to vote, over 4 out of every 5 respondents (81.0%) would be likely to vote in a referendum. (Once again, this figure should be viewed with some caution. All surveys which cover intention to vote show a high level of ‘over-reporting’.) The data also reveals that older respondents are much more likely to go and vote in referendums.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS A VIEW ON THE NEW CONSTITUTION

Almost half of all respondents (49.3%) claim they have not had an opportunity to express their view on the new decision making structure for the town or city council. Overall, just under one in five respondents (18.3%) are satisfied with the opportunities they have had to express a view. 3.0% are very satisfied.

Providing no opportunities to express views on council decision-making arrangements would seem to lead to less interest in voting: 79.9% and 73.5% of respondents given no opportunity, respectively, indicate that they would be very likely or fairly likely to vote in referendum or mayoral election. Providing some opportunity generates more interest in voting whether residents are satisfied with the opportunities or not. Those who are more satisfied with opportunities seem most likely to vote in a referendum and in an election for a mayor – 86.5% and 81.5% of satisfied respondents, respectively, indicate that they would be very likely or fairly likely to vote in referendum or mayoral election.

## Information from the Council

On average, the proportion of respondents who consider their council 'keeps them well informed about things that are happening in their area that affect them as residents' roughly balances the proportion of respondents who think their council does not do this very well.

On average, just over a quarter of respondents (26.1%) had seen or heard something about new decision-making structures for their council and just under three-quarters (73.1%) had not. However, the results seem to vary considerably by local authority area. Perhaps reflecting the greater interest older residents tend to have in local politics, older age groups are more likely to have seen/heard information on different ways decisions could be made in their council: 30.7% of respondents aged 65+ recall seeing such information, compared with only 19.6% of those aged between 18 and 24.

The most common source of such information (on average) is a leaflet or publication from the council (55.4% of respondents who have seen something saw it here). The next most common source is a newspaper (45.8% of respondents who have seen

something saw it here). On average, just under one in ten respondents (9.3%) saw or heard the information on radio or television; 4.2% by word of mouth and 4.7% 'somewhere else'.

## Local Politics

Consistent with evidence from other surveys, interest in local politics is generally very low. Only around one in twenty (4.8%) respondents (on average across ten authorities) have a great deal of interest in local politics.

Between 10% and 20% of respondents in every local authority area claimed they understand the alternative ways of council decision-making very well. On balance, more respondents claim to understand the alternative ways than do not (15.1% understand them very well + 49.8% understand them fairly well = 64.9%).

## Views on the Council and Councillors

Over half (55.3%) of all respondents, on average, are satisfied with the way their council runs things. Analysis of responses by age group indicates that those respondents in the higher age groups tend to be less satisfied with the way their city or town council runs things. For example, the 61.9% of those aged 18-24 are satisfied (to some extent) with the way the council runs things compared to around 53% of those aged over 54 years. It would seem, from the relatively small number of towns and cities covered in the surveys, that the longer you live in a town or city the more likely it is you will 'build up' a level of dissatisfaction: for example, 23.5% of respondents who have lived in their town or city for between 10 and 14 years are, to some extent, dissatisfied with their council, compared with 9.4% of respondents who have lived there for less than 2 years.

One in twenty (5.0%) respondents, on average, would just about always trust their councillors to come to the 'best view' on a major proposal affecting their area. On average, approaching two thirds (61.6%) of respondents would never, or only sometimes, trust the councillors of their city or town council to come to the best view. As with satisfaction with the local council, it would seem that respondents who have lived in an area for a

relatively short period of time are more likely to trust their councillors to come to the best view on an important local issue.

There was quite a high level of agreement with the statement that 'councillors lose touch with people pretty quickly': on average, almost a quarter of respondents (23.2%) agree strongly and 37.9% agree (combined agreement by around 60% of respondents on average). Quite high levels of agreement were also recorded for the statement 'councillors don't care much what people like me think'. On average, one in five respondents (20.4%) strongly agree with this statement and 27.2% simply agree (combined agreement by 47.6% of respondents on average).

## Conclusions

Throughout this year, proposals have been received by the Department from local authorities for their new constitutions. In deciding on the form of constitution to be included in these proposals, all local authorities are required to have regard to consultations, both of a quantitative and qualitative nature, with the public and other key stakeholders. The Department has issued guidelines on approaches and methods authorities can adopt for such consultation, although these are not binding on them. In line with this, local authorities have adopted a wide variety of different approaches. They have not necessarily adopted the sort of techniques used in this study.

The survey results presented in the report show the views of representative samples of respondents in ten cities and large towns. The results show that in every area surveyed there is strong support for a public decision on who is the leading councillor and generally positive views about what a directly elected mayor might mean for the city or town.

The analysis shows that certain groups are less likely to favour a public decision on who is the leading councillor in the city or town council: respondents from older age groups, respondents from higher socio-economic groups, respondents more satisfied with the council, their councillors, and information provision etc. However, even within all of these groupings support for a public decision consistently outweighs support for a decision amongst existing councillors.

It would seem that many people who are supportive of the idea of a directly elected mayor are content for the arrangement to be put in place without their formal involvement to ensure that it happens. They appear no more willing to vote in a mayoral referendum or election. Conversely, those more interested in local politics and more likely to vote in local elections would continue to be more likely to participate in formal votes even if they are less likely to agree with the system or the possible outcome. Propensity to vote in a mayoral election appears to have more to do with a person's general level of political mobilisation than the degree to which they support the idea of a mayor. The data also reveals that older respondents are much more likely to go and vote in referendums. If this is the case in actual referendums, the votes cast are more likely to reflect the preferences of those within older age groups.

## Further information

IFF Research Ltd were commissioned by the Department to manage the telephone surveys – subsequent reporting was conducted by the Department's Local and Regional Government Research Unit.

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