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Largest cities offered a vote on whether to have an elected mayor

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RESIDENTS of Britain's 12 biggest cities will be invited to take part in referendums to decide whether they should have elected mayors, under plans to be outlined this week.

Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Liverpool and Leeds are among the cities that will be asked whether they want a new figure-head similar to the role Boris Johnson plays as mayor of London.

The plans, contained in the Localism Bill, will be set out by Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, and, if approved, the referendums could take place by 2012.

A number of high-profile figures have expressed an interest in standing for mayor, including Terry Christian, the television presenter, who is hoping to be elected mayor of Manchester. Siôn Simon, a

former Labour minister who stepped down as MP for Birmingham Erdington, has spoken of his desire to run for the mayoralty of the second city.

Other potential candidates for the post, which would carry with it responsibility for a budget running into hundreds of millions of pounds, include Lord Jones, the former trade minister, and Sir Michael Lyons, the chairman of the BBC.

The other cities that would be eligible to elect mayors are Sheffield, Bradford, Wakefield, Coventry, Nottingham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Leicester.

The Bill will set out exact details of the powers the mayors will wield. Campaigners have said that the mayors must have more authority than existing council leaders. Claire Maughan, the deputy director of the Centre for Cities, said: "We would like to see mayors

across all areas, across real economic areas, with that strategic power over housing, transport and skills such as Boris Johnson has."

Elected mayors were attempted under Tony Blair's administration, but there were teething problems with the scheme. In 2002, H'Angus, the monkey mascot of Hartlepool United football club, was voted mayor of Hartlepool and awarded a £35,000 salary on a pledge to provide schools with free bananas.

The Localism Bill also contains plans to give residents the power to take over responsibility for planning from town halls.

They will be freed to redevelop their properties without bureaucracy, and will also be handed responsibility for approving or rejecting proposals for new housing developments, office blocks or building on local green space. Mr Pickles will also announce a cap on local government salaries.