

Dear Mayoral candidate

Posted on: 15 March 2017 by [Paul Hepburn](#) in [Dear Mayoral candidate](#)



The campaign to elect the first directly elected Mayor for the Liverpool City Region is now underway. With this in mind the Heseltine Institute has been hosting this blog with the purpose of asking thought leaders and local policymakers to contribute their policy ideas on what the Mayor might do to re-energise the political economy of the City Region. In the spirit of our blog we are now inviting you to respond to the ideas it generated.

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This new political post of 'metro' Mayor will lead a Combined Authority for the City region. In devolving powers and responsibilities to this new governance model the Government expects more financial, political and service delivery collaboration across the local authority areas of Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral with a view to improving the prosperity for all in this city region. Initially, the new Mayor will have direct responsibility for: housing and planning; education and skills; transport; and, will start to prepare for the integration of social care and health. Criticisms have been levelled at the Government for not devolving more fiscal powers – particularly in the teeth of austerity- to ensure that these new governance arrangements will be properly funded. Nevertheless, it remains true that the new Mayor will effectively be held responsible, by the voting public, for ensuring this

collaboration works to ensure the greater well-being and prosperity for the Liverpool City Region.

This is no small task. A recent **The State of Liverpool City Region Report: Making the Most of Devolution** has highlighted that the city region is falling behind the rest of the country in terms of wealth, jobs and productivity. The region is **ranked**, on a range of indicators, as the most deprived area in England and inequalities within the region are also stark with Knowsley and Liverpool ranked, respectively, 2nd and 4th most deprived local authority areas in the country.

So, given the scale of these challenges and faced with the prospect of devolution, and a new Metro Mayor, our blog was positioned to try and animate a timely and open conversation about how a Mayor might overcome these problems and make a positive difference to the city region. Many ideas were forthcoming - some complementary some less so. The following attempts a summary.

Regional infrastructure

Addressing an inefficient infrastructure was a priority for a number of contributors. Transport within the region and across the so-called Northern powerhouse was marked for improvement. Specifically, a new Mayor should act *'... to improve the bus network including a more straightforward well connected network with simplified and affordable fares and smart ticketing that properly integrates with the local rail network'* and a *'... new high speed rail link for Liverpool to Manchester, HS3, with a link onto HS2- delivering full high speed connectivity for our City Region, North-south and East West.'*

Another contributor took issue with the idea of 'grand plans' such as HS3 and considered that the Mayor should *'... concentrate on 'doable' projects which can bring the whole of the north together. Finish off the rail electrification and upgrading between Liverpool and Leeds which has already been started and get some quality trains on order. There's no need for a completely new 'HS3'. Instead create something more like the London Overground, where existing facilities are linked up, upgraded and rebranded, with new trains. Create an east west spine route and a network which reaches out to the old industrial towns, as well as the city centres'*.

A pertinent contribution noted that investment and regeneration now relies as much on IT infrastructure as traditional transport and utility infrastructure. The new Mayor needed to address the reality that *'... our ICT infrastructure across*

LCR is downright awful if we are being truthful. We have been failed by government and those who have been tasked to deliver. Large parts of prime business areas are making do with internet speeds and connectivity that are damaging our competitiveness.' In this context the new Mayor was advised to recognise the threats and opportunities posed by Brexit. So, for example, state aid on infrastructure is regulated by the EU and Liverpool is currently held back from opening some dark fibre for this reason. It should also be recognised that the region's gaming sector looks more to the States and Far East than Europe.

One contributor argued that any focus on economic growth should be supported by the creation of a housing infrastructure offer that meets the needs of the economy as it grows and diversifies. The argument here is that GVA growth can be achieved through a significant but holistic approach to house building activity. Such an approach would enable: graduate retention; social mobility; and, *'employment growth and skills development by linking the provision of construction skills development to a long-term House Building Programme'*. Suffice to say it should also offer a diverse range of homes at differing values and tenures to meet the needs of individuals and families from across the city region.

Another contributor urged the Mayor to look towards the 'Northern Powerhouse' and work with partners across this area to promote the establishment of a Northern Investment Bank *'... to create municipal bonds for investment in infrastructure and in fast growing local companies, rebuilding the local banking infrastructure the north has lost over the last 40 years'*.

Strong local economies

Of course, one problem with the traditional approach to economic development and growth is that it nearly always focuses on high-end GVA growth and rarely connects with more local priorities of 'community economic development' – such as increasing people's prosperity, business sector resilience, local money flows and sustainable resource use. As one of our contributors remarked: one only need look at the **London economy** to realise that high-end GVA growth does not on its own translate into low poverty levels, equally distributed wealth, affordable housing and resilient, small-scale local economies. Rather, she argues, the new Mayor should act to establish a strong local supply chain to connect smaller scale, locally owned, and also socially oriented businesses to any large scale inward investment. It is this attention and creative thought to building that middle bit of the supply chain of

the economic infrastructure that will ensure devolution can *'...deliver real, tangible benefits to local residents and local business and stimulate the regional economy from the bottom up'*.

In a similar vein a different contributor challenged the Mayor to move away from 'politics as usual' and do economic development differently, *'the new authority has the opportunity to make growth both sustainable and meaningful, by ensuring that wellbeing and equalities are used as the driving factors when designing new economic solutions.'* To this end she argues that, for example, economic growth and business development should be joined up with initiatives that reach into the NHS to work collaboratively with public health and the CCGs.

Innovation through diversity

A common criticism of local government is that it constrains innovation through an elite and technocratic decision-making process that is highly path-dependent. One contributor argued that a Mayoral commitment to diversity and equality of opportunity amongst policymakers is one way of breaking this path dependency, she notes *'...there is a growing body of research that makes the link between diversity at all levels of an organisation and enhanced creativity, performance, cohesion, innovation and increased employee and customer engagement.'* She argues if devolution is to succeed the Mayor must attract a more diverse talent pool such as women, young and disabled people to draw in different types of experience from the norm. To this end the Mayor should move beyond the usual tick box procedures and consider use of quotas, gender audits, and make a commitment to gender parity amongst senior policymakers whilst promoting a better work life balance. The adoption of such practices would improve the devolved structures effectiveness and decision-making by tapping into a broader range of perspectives.

Engagement

Fostering greater engagement with local communities, businesses and more democratic decision-making was a common theme in our contributions. It was recognised that developing a more open, transparent and participatory local government culture was not easy but the rewards could be immense in terms of innovative solutions to old problems and enhanced community well-being. As one contributor put it, *'...real community engagement is messy and is not produced from traditional risk adverse local authority models. Innovation hubs that prototype solutions and create new ideas can evolve if an appetite for risk is developed... the catalysts for change that the new authority will be seeking,*

can very easily come from those very communities that they are elected to serve'.

The 'politics as usual' approach of top-down decision-making may not deliver the required step change the city region economy requires. Democratising economic decision making and giving local communities and local businesses a greater voice, according to one contributor, could help to not only foster innovation but also develop a more resilient and sustainable local economy.

A greater involvement of, and more openness with, local elected representatives was also mentioned. Their active involvement in the new governance arrangements and policy development was thought critical to the future success of the new governance arrangements. To this end another contributor argued for more bespoke training for local elected representatives.

It has become commonplace to argue that ICTs can help with engagement and one contributor, whilst concurring with this, also warned that the new Mayor must be aware that '*...vast swathes of LCR society are still viewing the internet and digital approaches as being something other people do*'. This level of digital exclusion is a social and economic problem for the City region and one the Mayor needs to address.

Culture

One contributor argued strongly that the new Mayor should build upon the legacy of Liverpool's European Capital of Culture, 2008. This was a year when the city was '*...re-energised and its people regained a confidence that had been beaten down by 30 years of negative press*.' He argues that engaging people in cultural activity delivers manifold benefits: it combats loneliness and depression; builds self-esteem; self-confidence; and, increases wellbeing. Culture is also '*...the rocket fuel of economic growth*'. To further these goals and celebrate the 10th anniversary of Liverpool's status as Capital of Culture the Local Cultural Partnership has been formed which the new Mayor is urged to support.

I am sure you will agree that these are an interesting set of ideas As a Mayoral candidate, and in the interests of promoting more debate and involvement in the unfolding devolution process, we would welcome your response.

Yours sincerely

Paul Hepburn