The speed of change

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In recent times the speed of change – driven by technology – has been so rapid that it has thrown up challenges and opportunities like never before. Not even the industrial revolution saw change such as we see now right across the globe and Liverpool city region needs to be not only prepared for it but running with it already.

For me there are five key, interlinked challenges that the digital agenda in the Liverpool City Region has to address, underpinned by a sixth. They exist at a local level but any new city region Mayor will wish to be aware of them and consider the role they could or should play.

Infrastructure

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. Investment and regeneration now relies as much on IT infrastructure as traditional transport and utility infrastructure.

A city region Mayor, with responsibilities for coordinating strategic planning, will need to push this agenda forward and help coordinate improvements; perhaps based on the approach we are taking in Liverpool to make use of assets and ducting already controlled by local authorities.

Digital services

The reality is that the city region Mayor has limited input on service delivery – individual local authorities will still be where that happens – but will have a coordinating role. Unlike at local authority level, they will have no resources to drive implementation and will have to rely on their oversight position to help identify and deliver efficiencies; especially when it comes to devolving services from Westminster (their primary function). This will need to be done in light of the move towards digital services both needed for efficiency and expected by the public.

Open data

The approach to city region mayors has been limited in its openness. Deals have been discussed behind closed doors with little more than *fait accompli* presented to other elected representatives. The future of government, given the context within which we now operate, will have to be more open or risk active rather than passive disengagement. This really matters because, as holders of huge amounts of data, local government has enormous potential to both good and bad in an economy driven by data. The University of Liverpool's Urban Living Partnership ideas around giving power over data back to individuals and communities may point towards a solution.

Governance

Who is responsible and how we engage both the public and private sectors alongside local communities is key. Elected representatives from ward through to city region level clearly have a responsibility to represent their constituents and ensure no community is left behind. However, equally they have a responsibility to protect people from the negative impacts of the digital advance.

Engagement

How do we ensure we are helping people make the most of online opportunities? St Helens' partnership with O2 to help people and businesses see the benefits of digital economy is a great programme but actually

demonstrates how far behind we are. The internet is not a new phenomena and it is taking too long for the engagement via our education system to filter through to wider society. We are left with vast swathes of LCR society still viewing the internet and digital approaches as being something other people do. A city region Mayor has to be mindful of the gap between technology and people.

Skills

Education is the underpinning of all of the challenges mentioned above – whether that is to address or exploit the opportunities they bring. A city region Mayor will need to be able to create a lifelong approach to skills development that is flexible enough to cope with the rapidly changing digital environment. That is no mean feat but by engaging beyond the traditional players, any by recognising that this agenda needs to be open to everyone and not just one demographic or age group. Pre-school, primary, secondary, further, higher, in-work, professional development education and more – all need a stake in this.

All of these challenges should all be aligned towards making LCR a more innovative city and one that throws off the restrictions artificially placed on it by people who want to hold onto a way of delivering change and managing urban environments that is not fit for the future and protects the status quo. This is because unless local government makes itself relevant within this area, technology and public engagement will leave it behind. Sometimes – and this is the really difficult thing – it will be about recognising when the city region, the local authorities and others should get out of the way or do nothing. In politics, that is always a thorny problem.

It would be remiss to not mention the EU referendum and the implications it may have. It is difficult to identify them all at present due to the uncertainty of the next steps, but there will be benefits and drawbacks. State aid restrictions may affect how we invest in infrastructure – Liverpool is currently held back from opening some dark fibre for this reason. Similarly, our gaming sector looks more to the States and Far East than Europe. However, EU research support and key relationships currently built with other EU countries and cities may well suffer. It is too early to know, but a Metro Mayor will have to be vigilant to the opportunities as well as threats the referendum result creates. At the very least, they will be championing these issues outlines above in Westminster to ensure the city region gets a fair deal.

City region Mayors are a concept as yet untried but they perhaps have the capacity to deliver at a scale needed in the changing world economy where cities are as big as countries and connectivity is at everyone's fingertips. If Liverpool city region doesn't recognise these issues, if any forthcoming Mayor does not face these challenges then we may well throw away a golden opportunity. I am confident, however, that together the city region can thrive and deliver for all.