The emergence of the Combined Authority and the ‘Metro Mayor’ represents a hugely progressive step towards modernising the governance of the Liverpool City Region. This new political office covering a much broader geography than that of traditional local government means that, for the first time since the abolition of Merseyside County Council in 1986, policy will be made at the same scale as the functional economic geography of the conurbation.

As a consequence, in this report our attention has been restricted to five key areas that have been identified as meriting more in-depth scrutiny: the potential for a new agglomeration economy premised on re-industrialisation; identifying the character, spatial incidence and intransigence of deprivation; the city region’s status as an attractor of graduates; the energy generating potential of the river Mersey, and; the changing face of the retail economy.

The first issue, ‘re-industrialisation’, emerges both from recent research and what we learnt from canvassing opinion amongst public and private sector actors in the city region. Recent evidence on ‘re-shoring’ and an industrial renaissance more widely across Britain had been picked up in policy documents (e.g. Liverpool City Region LEP, 2016) and resonated with many of the stakeholders that we consulted at the work’s inception. However, our review of the literature showed that there was little in the way of evidence regarding how deeply-rooted or widely-distributed these industrial activities were in the Liverpool City Region; was there enough evidence to support the view that this economic activity constituted the beginning of a new agglomeration?

‘Identifying the character, spatial incidence and temporal nature of deprivation’, our second issue, was raised repeatedly by stakeholders as the principal brake on the Liverpool City Regional economy. Many of those who made this point referred to it as a perennial issue. This description resonated with researchers at the University of Liverpool who have developed new ways of thinking about (and mapping) deprivation where the longevity of the issue is a key variable. Consequently we have been able to respond to the desire felt amongst the policy community to gain a deeper understanding of the specific nature of deprivation (for example, the qualitative differences between areas where, say, income deprivation or health deprivation are relatively more or less important) and the process whereby deprivation becomes an entrenched characteristic of a neighbourhood. Both of these advances could support the development of a new generation of spatially-targeted policies.
Our choice to focus on the city region’s status as an attractor of graduates, our third issue, arises from recent research and media reportage, both national and local (Centre for Cities, 2009, 2016; Foresight Future of Cities, 2016; Liverpool Echo, 2016), which reaffirms the essentiality of a graduate workforce for there to be a meaningful connection between a city region and the high growth sectors of the global economy. Whilst research such as the State of the Liverpool City Region report provides a window onto the subject of graduate retention our engagement with policy makers at the inception stage of this research revealed that we lack a more clearly-focussed understanding of how we fare with respect to graduate attraction and mobility more widely. By examining secondary data sets from HEFCE, researchers at Liverpool John Moores University were able to produce some new insights into this question.

Perhaps the most obvious issue that we could not ignore in this report given the media attention it has garnered is the question of the viability of energy generating potential of the Mersey. Although there was ubiquitous interest in this issue and there has been some work already conducted on specific proposals the full range of options has so far not been set out in one document. To address this we commissioned new research from the University of Liverpool to explore the full suite of ways in which this immensely valuable natural asset could be a source of renewable energy. In addition we also make the case that, precisely because the river is such an immensely valuable natural asset, we should think collectively about how this resource is sustainably managed.

Finally, we were told repeatedly by those outside the universities that there had been far too little attention paid by the academic community to the issue of retail decline in the city region. The University of Liverpool is almost uniquely well-placed to correct this as one of three national hubs of the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Consumer Data Research Centre. By accessing a range of very large data sets through this facility we have been able to explore trend data on the relative resilience of our city, town and district centres to the global shift from high street to online retail. The evidence on this is clear. Our city region is home to polar experiences; we have some landmark retail destinations that are amongst the nation’s best performers, but we also have some town and district centres that have been radically altered in recent years, possibly fundamentally so.

Having identified this select range of questions to focus upon, researchers at the University of Liverpool’s Heseltine Institute led by Dr. Alexander Lord began work on An Agenda for the Liverpool City Region in Autumn 2016. From the outset the work was designed to follow a model of ‘co-production’ where multi-sector collaboration is inscribed into a project. The implications of this approach are far reaching. At the outset it became clear that this would be very different to ‘normal’ academic work. We wanted the research to be fully collaborative in nature and to build on our role as two civic universities. Moreover, we wanted to use every asset at our disposal. It was from these principles that we asked the academic researchers who took lead responsibilities for individual themes in the work to look as widely as possible in harnessing the talents of those outside the universities. Drawing in expertise from the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University and the public, private and third sectors from across the city region the project collated a huge amount of data. This ranged from large, secondary datasets accessible to the city’s two largest universities, to new bespoke pieces of research conducted in collaboration with the city region’s policy makers. In aggregate we have gathered a wealth of information, both quantitative and qualitative, that provides both facts and figures as well as a street-level view of what is happening ‘on the ground’.

As this would imply a huge number of people have contributed to the research that underpins this work. Over the period Autumn 2016 - Spring 2017 when the majority of the primary research was conducted there was an average of over 100 researchers working on this project at any one time.

Whilst it is customary to save thanks until the end of document such as this it is germane to the point just made to acknowledge the debt owed to those who got involved in this work for no other reason than their commitment to the city region and their intellectual curiosity. The list of contributors at the end of this report gives some indication of the breadth of input. For example, a significant debt of gratitude is owed to the final year undergraduate and masters students in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Liverpool. These students have made a huge contribution to this piece of work through their participation in the module, Urban Regeneration Project, designed specifically to unearth primary data related to the themes covered in this research. The material they gathered together with their enthusiasm and creative thinking permeates the report.

Despite the complexities of co-ordinating what is a wide-ranging and methodologically-challenging piece of research our aim has always remained consistent: to engage meaningfully with the worlds of policy and practice. Our principal guiding objective was to co-produce new research on the questions that we all — policy makers, citizens and academics alike — want to see investigated.

The results, presented in this report, describe a functional economic city-region of approximately 1.5 million people at a pivotal moment in its history.

In organising this report we cover only five issues. Some clearly represent strengths and opportunities for growth, others represent weaknesses and threats. However, as a caveat we would encourage the reader to see the points of tangency between these concepts. Here Kennedy’s reminder to the English speaking world in 1960 that “In the Chinese language, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters, one representing danger and the other, opportunity” is relevant. What might through one lens appear to be a threat can, through another, be construed as an opportunity. That depends upon the choices of policy makers. We hope this report is helpful to the policy community and illustrates our willingness to support that decision making process, with intelligence, data and research, on a continuing basis.

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