techUK
Mayoral Manifesto

Supporting a Vibrant Digital Economy

Building stronger local economies

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FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

Introduction

In May 2024 over 26 million people will head to the polls to vote for a regional Mayor.

Regions in England voting for their Mayor are faced with a range of challenges: from demographic change, to improving employment opportunities and local economic wealth. Set against a backdrop of rising citizen expectations and budget cuts, this poses a significant public policy challenge for Mayors.

These challenges cannot be faced alone, and digital technology presents the opportunity to do things differently and better for people and places.

The tech sector adds £150 billion p.a.[1] to the UK economy. The financial and economic rewards are clear, but they cannot be achieved without cultivating and harnessing the local tech ecosystem.

From growing regional economies, creating new jobs and careers, improving public services, new methods of policing and community safety, sharing information and communicating, recreation facilities, next generation innovation, regenerating local high streets, enhancing our environment, updating our transport system and mobility needs, the tech sector helps and supports every aspect of life.

The Mayors that recognise and engage with the tech sector will be able to re-shape and integrate services while championing the local economy to create better places to live and drive regional growth. This Manifesto includes a series of recommendations for the new Mayors to help them engender change and build capacity across the ecosystem of the region. It can act as a blueprint in helping to create a truly digital region. This includes everything from how the Mayors can reinvigorate local economies by better supporting start-ups to tackling the skills shortage to delivering better digital public services for people and places.

1. https://www.techuk.org/resource/techuk-calls-on-the-uk-political-partys-to-tackle-the-barriers-to-technological-innovation.html

A vibrant digital economy helps drive growth, create jobs, secure inward investment, foster innovation and is more globally connected.

techUK believes that the Mayor's should seek to:

Set a long term plan for digitising the economy

A quarter of UK SMEs do not use basic digital tools such as e-commerce, accounting and HR which have been found to boost sales by 18%, 11.8% and 7.5% respectively over 3 years (referenced in techUK's Seven Tech Priorities report[2]). Mayors should be incentivising digital adoption for SMEs through targeted interventions and schemes that utilise the savings from Help to Grow: Digital.

Mayors should look to appoint a single identified individual with responsibility for accelerating digitisation across the economy, and engaging with the tech sector to drive inward investment, support and connect with scale-ups and champion digital skills.

Investment Zones (IZs) should be the bastions of each region's tech enablement. All IZs have an important tech element to them and, while progress is being made, it is too slow, and does not engage enough SMEs, either those from the tech sector or those working with the tech sector. IZs should create spaces to allow businesses, consumers and customers to interact with new technology.

Outline a digital skills journey – for today, tomorrow and forever

At a national level techUK has called for a digital skills tool. However, that doesn't mean this alone must dictate, or hold up, local activity on this agenda. Mayors should ensure their communities are early adopters of digital skills by providing a plan for creating a talent pipeline, a digital curriculum offer for schools that works with industry and championing cyber literacy as a part of training programmes for all age groups. Digital inclusion should also form a key part of each Mayor's digital strategy with easily accessible programmes that monitor progress.

2. https://www.techuk.org/resource/techuk-calls-on-the-uk-political-partys-to-tackle-the-barriers-to-technological-innovation.html

Nurture a start-up and scale-up environment

Mayors need to adopt a "grow your own" strategy to aid their local business environment and move away from hoping unicorns spring up in their region. While unicorns are a catchy way to quickly assess the tech landscape, this is only a valuation rather than measure of output, and should not be the only metric. Mayors should be focused on supporting innovative tech businesses that would benefit quickly from scale-up support and those businesses where digitisation will help them improve productivity quickly and efficiently.

Mayors should seek to ensure they connect with and help drive the Government's Scale-Up Support and even add their own layer of support for companies in their locality.

Support digital infrastructure that's planning for the future

To drive digital growth Mayors should use their convening role to encourage local plans that factor in digital infrastructure, engage with the sector and identify potential nationally significant infrastructure projects to discuss with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Support local authorities to collectively engage with data centres and those supplying digital infrastructure to capture their views in Core Strategy and other development plan documents.

Some areas still lack basic access to the internet. In the areas of England electing a Mayor in May, only 69.8% of households have access to gigabit broadband and 79.7% have access to 5G coverage (data from techUK's Local Digital Index 2023[3]). Mayors should seek to engage with the digital communication sector to push toward 100% coverage and collectively look to examine uptake, not just coverage to drive a better picture of resident and business capacity and engagement in the tech sector.

Create data dashboards

With a growing number of Mayors and combined authorities, and sizeable budgets, there is a need to have regional data that can be compared as well as used to assess the impact of programmes in different localities. This, and other recommendations, should be designed to fit alongside the Level4 devolution framework.

Pursuing a more common language and impact dashboard model throughout England will allow greater transparency, the adoption of what is working to be quickly rolled out in other areas and to quickly intervene when it is not. All Mayors should input to this so that by 2028 there is a clear national standard.

3. https://www.techuk.org/shaping-policy/nations-and-regions-hub/local-digital-capital-index-2023.html

A digitally connected region will help increase the efficiency of public service delivery, meet the rising expectations of citizens and create better places where people want to live, work and thrive.

techUK believes that the Mayor's should seek to:

Digitally empower places and services

A truly digital region will be more connected and integrated with citizens, communities and businesses reaping the benefits. By grasping the digital agenda and having a digital-first mindset, Mayors can play a crucial role in spearheading the transformation of the region where citizens are empowered to shape services and create the places where they want to live.

Now is the time for services to be reimagined. The Mayors hold the levers to facilitate collaboration across local public services and coordinate how digital technologies can be maximised to create more efficient and productive organisation and deliver better outcomes. A good starting point is defining a digital strategy and vision for the region that considers everything from the economy to transforming local public services and ambition to use digital to solve key challenges. Regions have

their own identities based on local specialisms and a digital strategy will help cement this, making it clear what it is to be known for as a particular destination.

Appoint a Chief Digital Officer

To maximise the opportunities digital presents, there needs to be the digital leadership and culture in place for innovation and technology to thrive and succeed. If one is not already in place, in their first 100 days the Mayors should prioritise appointing a Chief Digital Officer (CDO) that will sit across all services and report directly to them and senior officer of the Combined Authority. The CDO will play a unique and supportive role to help leaders, relevant council leads and heads of services understand how digital can reshape services and become embedded in processes to deliver improved social outcomes.

By putting in place an empowered champion that cuts across all services and functions, Mayors will send a clear signal of commitment that digital and collaborative working are the new norm, declaring the

city region open to innovation. The CDO will also have a pivotal role in identifying new opportunities for revenue generation that will help finance future initiatives.

The CDO needs to have real capacity and power to act on recommendations and break down barriers to deliver better outcomes.

Set up an Office of Technology and Innovation

A regional Office of Technology and Innovation would help foster council collaboration on all things tech, digital and data. Helping to drive innovation to tackle the region's biggest challenges together. The Office would work with the CDO across the region to foster new partnerships and offer practical support to test new ideas and embed digital across the place. It would be the forum for councils to engage with industry on market engagement and come together for procurements, where appropriate.

Councils across the country face common challenges, from skills shortage to tackling homelessness. The Office of Technology and Innovation will provide the space for councils to innovate and scale up best practice.

The evaluation[4] of the London Office of Technology and Innovation has been positive, demonstrating the value of collaboration in helping digital teams to be more effective. Lessons can of course be learned but it is a model that could be replicated across the regions.

Bring together data around people and places

Effective use of data can help Mayors take a strategic approach to managing the city regions assets. The Mayor, along with the CDO, should map out the city regions assets and put in place a strategy for how this data can be used to generate revenue and finance future initiatives. To do this a commitment to use city region wide data must be in place.

A region powered on data, with a clear commitment from the Mayor to open up data and make decisions based on city wide data is key to enabling resources to be targeted more effectively. This will help to reduce costs, as well as designing more predictive services that lead to better outcomes.

Opening up data also affords local business and start-ups the opportunity to interpret the problem and become suppliers of innovative local solutions. It is also a great way to add value to the city-region, connecting the community and allowing citizens to use data to crowdsource and solve their own issues.

Launch a Digital Public Services Sprint

To grow regional investment and attract new innovators and business to the area, the Mayor together with the CDO, should launch a yearly Digital Public Services Sprint. This would showcase the regions digital ambition and needs and share the challenges they are trying to solve. By taking a problem first approach, industry, particular SMEs will be better informed in how they can support the region and tailoring their solutions appropriately.

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4. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/LOTI Evaluation report final.pdf

Nations and Regions Hub

techUK champions the tech sector throughout the UK. We work with local authorities, devolved government, and local and national policy makers to advocate for the tech sector in strengthening economic growth and resilience across the nations and regions. We provide opportunities for our members and stakeholders to meet, develop relationships, and collaborate to drive forward projects that build stronger local economies.

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About techUK

techUK is a membership organisation that brings together people, companies and organisations to realise the positive outcomes of what digital technology can achieve. We collaborate across business, Government and stakeholders to fulfil the potential of technology to deliver a stronger society and more sustainable future. By providing expertise and insight, we support our members, partners and stakeholders as they prepare the UK for what comes next in a constantly changing world.

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