

Manchester's Digital Strategy

Located in the north-west of England, Manchester was once the cradle of the industrial revolution. In recent decades, Manchester has become a quintessential example of a city in transition from manufacturing towards more knowledge-based industries. Growth has been spearheaded by diversification into areas such as information communication technologies, indicating the progress of the city's digital economy. However, despite progress, a persistent skills mismatch, unemployment, and social exclusion are still heavily felt.

Project overview

The city's Digital Strategy is a transformative roadmap of programmes and projects under the overarching goal of making Manchester one of the world's leading digital cities by 2020. The Digital Strategy is currently championed by the City Council as an umbrella or meta-level strategy, cutting across different domains of Manchester's development policies, including economic attractiveness, skills and employment, social integration, access, and governance. Dating back to 1989, Manchester's digital-related initiatives have been closely linked with the city's regeneration agenda (economic, social, physical). Although city priorities have evolved over time, IT and digital initiatives in Manchester have remained tools to catalyse change. From 2008 onwards, the Digital Strategy has been recognised as a priority in the city's administration, with the symbolic status of a Master Plan. In addition, it aims to position Manchester as a competitive player in the global digital market whilst tackling locally-rooted and persistent socio-economic challenges.

Results and impact

A number of outcomes and results can be linked to the more recent version of Manchester's Digital Strategy: i) the award of an Urban Broadband Fund (£12 million) to roll out superfast and ultrafast broadband with the aim of covering 100 percent of the city; ii) the securing of £1.5 million development funds to stimulate business demand for connectivity in Greater Manchester; iii) the recruitment of 800 volunteers or 'digital champions' for the GO ON Manchester initiative, demonstrating progressive engagement of the population and business parties; iv) increased social connectivity through the facilitation of a free public wi-fi network in public transport hubs; v) several new partnerships across the public and private sector (e.g. Digital skills strategic framework); vi) the establishment of an open data philosophy at

the City Council and acceleration of local open data ambitions; vii) improvements in the CRM (customer relationship management) services in the City Council towards increased digitalisation. Moreover, from a 'softer' perspective, the new strategy has contributed to increased awareness concerning the relevance of the 'digital' for Manchester's development prospects. The strategy has also legitimised the role of other organisation-level digital strategies across the city and has united stakeholders around shared visions and development narratives.

Enablers

From the 1990s until recently, Manchester's urban regeneration agenda acted as an incubator, supporting the city's digital strategies to reach a higher degree of maturity. Beyond this, a number of additional factors also emerged as critical enablers. Firstly, the Digital Strategy benefited from the support of stable, leading officials in the City Council. Moreover, the appointment of an assistant chief executive directly responsible for the strategy helped to give the strategy higher 'symbolic status' within the administration. Additionally, the operational leadership of Manchester's Digital Development Agency has been essential in ensuring a smooth transition from the regeneration-driven agenda to the city's new ambitions. This has permeated the strategy with a variety of new digital paradigms whilst acting as a boundary spanner, connecting new organisations and digital innovators to each other and to the Digital Strategy. Secondly, the mobilisation of new partnerships and funding was pivotal. The Digital Strategy is anchored in varied funding schemes, such as European and National funding, combined with small seed money from the City to leverage innovative projects, volunteer work and the own internal resources of the different stakeholders. This combination of sources has been critical in leveraging different projects in a context of increasing financial constraints. Lastly, some of the early achievements of the Digital Strategy relied on the capacity of its promoters to take risks, such as challenging higher level regulations and the involvement of unusual suspects (e.g. community groups) in the implementation of the Strategy.

