

Speech by the Mayor of Greater Manchester to the GM Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner, 17 May 2018

Good evening – it's good to be back.

For those who have sat through a number of my after-dinner speeches, you will probably have noticed they follow a familiar structure – a few football and political anecdotes, coupled with a few more serious points.

Tonight I thought I would do something different. I thought I owed you a more substantial speech – setting out the big vision for business and industry in Greater Manchester, drawing together the threads of the initiatives we have underway into a coherent whole, building on our hard-won reputation for being a business-friendly city and showing how we're going to go up a level to become the business-friendliest city in the UK – not just attracting the new, but nurturing our start-ups and growing our established businesses.

Before I get into the detail, I want to start with a thank you – you've all been there for me. But not just me, you have been there for my team – Baroness Bev Hughes, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, who many of you in the Chamber will already know well, and Sir Richard Leese, Deputy Mayor for Business and the Economy.

Jane [Boardman] and Clive [Memmott] and the team at the Chamber have provided great support on so many fronts – but so many of you have too.

Last year I asked for your help on rough sleeping and homelessness – and I have had so much support.

We all want a Greater Manchester that looks after its citizens and puts a roof over every head.

We have had so many offers of help that we have set up the Homelessness Business Network under the leadership of Tim Heatley and already it's making an impact.

I asked for your help on protecting our environment and you were there, to deliver our ambition to make Greater Manchester free of single-use plastic by 2020 – with more than 50 businesses signing up already.

And when tragedy struck you were there again.

Shortly after I stood here last year, we had the horrific attack at the Manchester Arena.

But I didn't even have to ask ... you were just there and you were brilliant.

Our business community stepped forward straight away and alongside our faith, community and public sectors helped the city back to its feet.

For me, that's the character of Greater Manchester businesses – commerce with a conscience.

Pursuing individual success, but always with an eye to the wider good – true corporate citizens providing good jobs and more.

So we build on the strongest of foundations. But there is no time to waste.

I hesitate to introduce the ‘B-word’ but – whatever your views – Brexit will increasingly test us.

58 per cent of Greater Manchester’s exports are to the EU – compared with 42 per cent for the country as a whole.

So, we need to be ready for the challenges ahead.

With the negative energy in the national political scene I have tried in my first year to make Greater Manchester the counterpoint – the place everyone is talking about where positive energy is flowing.

But I’ve also tried to be true to Manchester and to do things differently.

I’ve tried to create a new, healthier way of doing politics.

As I said last year, I have left the point-scoring behind and prioritised place over party; moved away from the old thinking that all issues can be solved by public money and adopted a whole-society approach; and – of course – if you are to mobilise the contribution of all sectors, you can’t do it in the old top-down way. The Greater Manchester way is not to “do to”, but to “do with”.

I put this into action when I called my Digital Summits and Green Summit.

I am clear: I want Greater Manchester to be the UK’s leading Digital City and leading Green City. Why? Because digitisation and decarbonisation will be the two driving industrial forces of the 21st Century – the source of future prosperity – and I want Greater Manchester to be in a leadership position on both.

Digital and tech, and green growth, are important sectors in their own right. But, in time, all businesses will be fully digital and zero-carbon and that’s why we must embrace the future now and get ahead of the game.

Our ambitions are already being rewarded.

We have secured £25m from the DCMS to deliver full-fibre broadband to the premises. Due to the work of my Deputy Mayor, Sir Richard Leese, GCHQ are opening their new centre here, making Greater Manchester a cyber capital.

We need now to take this thinking further into developing our Local Industrial Strategy.

We have agreed with the Government that we will sign this off by next March and true to our new way of working we want to involve you in the writing of it.

It needs to be a coherent vision where digital strength can link into other sectors such as health innovation, materials, advanced manufacturing and our unrivalled cultural sector.

I can't think of a better location for Channel 4 – can you?

By this time next year, I want us to have an ambitious and powerful new Industrial Strategy for Greater Manchester that we've all helped create and we're all behind.

But we need to be honest that it will only succeed if backed by a plan for productivity; a plan for skills; and a plan for transport.

Let me take each in turn.

The best way to improve productivity is to encourage stable, fairly-paid work. The Chamber is already promoting the living wage, and mental health in the workplace through the This is Me campaign launched this week.

I am proud that the vast majority of Greater Manchester businesses are good employers.

Our Good Employment Standard will celebrate that, while highlighting those who need to raise their game.

On skills, we need to deliver a clear message to Government – we can't have a strong Local Industrial Strategy without a strong local plan for skills.

We will not build a talent pipeline into the priority sectors of our economy unless we can work much more closely with our colleges, schools and employers.

Next year, the Adult Education Budget will be devolved.

But we need control of the post-16 skills budget and, crucially, flexibility over the apprenticeship levy.

After all, this is your money.

But a large amount of it is unspent.

Apprenticeship starts have dropped by 27 per cent over the last year.

We need more flexibility, bigger ambitions, and parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses.

That is why I will soon set out plans to create a UCAS-style system for apprentices – giving young people wanting a technical education the same clear set of options as those on the academic route.

And we need to give businesses the ability to drive our education system in a way they have never had before.

But the biggest challenge, without doubt, is transport.

You could argue that we are the victim of our own success.

The economic growth of our city region is asking questions of the transport system it can't answer.

The biggest problem is this – it can't integrate because all modes have different lines of accountability.

My first job was to get national bodies into one room and have one conversation about Greater Manchester.

Along with Sir Richard Leese, I have created the Mayoral Transport Board – and I was pleased to ask Clive Memmott to serve as your voice on it.

The Board brings together key players in our transport system, making the likes of Highways England, Network Rail, Northern, Transpennine Express and the bus companies more accountable.

But we need to go much further. We need a London-style system. It will be a long job but we're going to get there.

We have set up a 24/7 operational control room to monitor the transport system. Something we didn't have before but which is crucial if we want to have a transport system fit for a leading global city.

We have ordered 27 more trams and this weekend I will unveil plans for a zonal system like the London Underground, giving people more for their money, and contactless payment from January next year.

And I have asked Chris Boardman, our Cycling and Walking Commissioner, to build us a world-class cycling infrastructure.

But I need your help.

I can't tackle congestion with public money alone.

That is why I have put forward a Congestion Deal – asking people to get behind it and be prepared to do what they can.

We are looking at transport incentives to encourage businesses to offer people flexible start times.

Half-term feels very different on our roads, but there is only an 8 to 10 per cent drop in traffic. That shows the difference small changes can make.

We also need much better infrastructure, backed by Government investment.

That is why we are arguing for high speed East-West rail links through the building of Northern Powerhouse Rail, linked to HS2 and with world-class stations at Manchester Airport and Piccadilly.

You will hear more of this over the coming months as we use devolution to build the voice of the North.

Next month Northern Leaders will be meeting to plan for a Convention for the North later this year.

This will bring political and business leaders together so that we can jointly make our case to Government.

In conclusion, we are living through turbulent times.

But together we can make it a moment of change.

Greater Manchester has a window of opportunity we will never get back.

At a time when the national debate is bogged down, we can break through the negativity and write our own future.

Great days lie ahead for Greater Manchester.

We can lead a new Industrial Revolution that, unlike the last, gives people back clean air to breathe, green spaces to enjoy, good jobs – a revolution which leaves no person or place behind.

Greater Manchester has changed the world before. Let's go out there and do it again.