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# TV social commentator's vision of Newport's future

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**By David Deans**

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NEWPORT'S leaders need to gear up for potentially dramatic social change over the next ten years, according to one of Britain's most foremost social commentators.

Mal Fletcher said creeping urbanisation, an ageing population and the future of technology present both challenges and opportunities for the city.

He leads the 2020Plus think tank – which tracks social change and predicts the trends that leaders may encounter.

They're themes he's due to explore when he speaks in Newport next month.

Mr Fletcher said that regional cities across Europe are experiencing growth, with 50 per cent of people on the continent expected to live in urban centres by 2015.

He said the ballooning population will lead to a greater demand for public services, energy supplies, as well as tensions between the need of land for housing and for agriculture.

Indeed, the provision of power could become increasingly more localised, with communities driving efforts to generate own electricity rather than seeking it from the National Grid.

Local authorities could become minor power firms, potentially through renewable energy, while recycling their own materials.

The isolation of city life will also give people greater opportunities to work in the mental health sector – with demands for stress management and anxiety counselling.

“One in four Britain's already face irrational fears,” Mr Fletcher said. “A big part of that is because of urban isolation. As cities grow that need to connect and feelings of alienation are going to grow.”

And with Newport being one of the UK's most 19 most severely unaffordable cities, urban planners will also need to work with architects and private developers to create creative attractive medium-density low-rise housing developments, he said, and not the high-rise urban sprawls of the past.

High-technology industries such as biotech and nanotechnology will also present opportunities to Newport over the next few years.

Mr Fletcher said ever changing technologies will put demands on local governments to become ever more tech savvy in fields like communication and social networking, potentially leaving them out of the loop within five to six years if they fail to do so, he said.

Cities like Newport will also need to provide infrastructure for high-technology companies to bloom, providing attractive enclaves for companies to gather together and for professionals to live in.

Meanwhile the population of cities in the developing world is getting older – and with that there will come growing tensions between the generations.

People aged under-26, those he calls the Millennial generation, are going to be reluctant to carry the costs of the pensions of those in the baby boomer generations and those who are who are in their late 30s and 40s.

To help reduce the tension between the ages, Mr Fletcher said cities will have the opportunity to start up organisations which give older people the opportunity to make a contribution to society.

“It’s no longer going to be enough to get people in old folks homes and leave them there,” he said.

Overall, however, he said cities cannot prosper and grow without a sense of confidence – and the rhetoric of the cities leaders needs to match its reality.

Mr Fletcher explained: “Without that people will lose confidence. Once they stop trusting the system people will take an even more ‘for-themselves’ approach.”

“A lot of thought has gone into these developments but we probably need even more joined up thinking over the next five to ten years.”

What kind of city do you want Newport to be in 10 years time – and what are you going to do to set it in motion?

That’s the question Mal Fletcher will be bringing to community and business leaders in Newport when to speaks at the King’s Centre next month.

The futurologist will be holding a talk at the church on Thursday September 9 to discuss how the city can deal with the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead over the next decade.

Then on Friday September 10 Mal Fletcher will be the guest speaker at Newport’s Night of Honour evening at the church, honouring the city’s local heroes.

The morning talk takes place between 9.30am to 12pm, while in second event will take place from 7-9pm.

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