

Place and Resources Overview Committee

18 April 2023

Dorset Council's roles in ensuring better broadband and mobile coverage across Dorset - Developing a Digital Infrastructure Strategy

For Review and Consultation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr J Haynes, Corporate Development and Transformation

Local Councillor(s): All. Digital infrastructure benefits all wards

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

- Dorset Council agreed its vision for **Dorset as a Digital Place** in 2021.
- Cabinet 28 Feb 2023 endorsed the **Dorset Digital Vision** update and agreed to the development of a Digital Infrastructure Strategy to supplement the digital vision.
- Dorset has a mostly **rural and highly protected** landscape.
- Digital Connectivity in Dorset (fixed and mobile) is markedly below national comparators.
- Dorset needs to be **easier to deal with** for network providers to improve Digital Infrastructure across the county to achieve its Digital Place vision.
- More radical solutions may be needed to achieve our ambition.
- More innovative solutions will be required in hard to reach areas.

Recommendation:

The Place and Resources Overview Committee is asked to consider the content of this report and accompanying presentation, and:

1. Comment on the proposals for a Digital Infrastructure Strategy contained in the report;
2. Agree the timescale for development and adoption of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy and the Committee's role;
3. Note the roles that several Dorset Council services need to play in supporting improved digital infrastructure.

Reason for Recommendation:

Digital infrastructure and the ability to exploit its potential are essential to enable inclusive growth and prosperity. A clear and unambiguous strategy and action plan will further this aim.

1. Background

- 1.1 Dorset Council's Economic Growth Strategy is very clear about the role of digital infrastructure:

Digital connectivity plays a key role in both improving productivity and addressing environmental challenges. The roll out and utilisation of full fibre technology and 5G will enable people to travel less and access opportunities. The impact of COVID-19 has demonstrated the absolute necessity to have reliable, resilient and up-to-date digital infrastructure. This will support economic activity and provide community services. The infrastructure and ability to exploit its potential are essential to enable inclusive growth and prosperity. This will help realise the vision for clean economic growth.

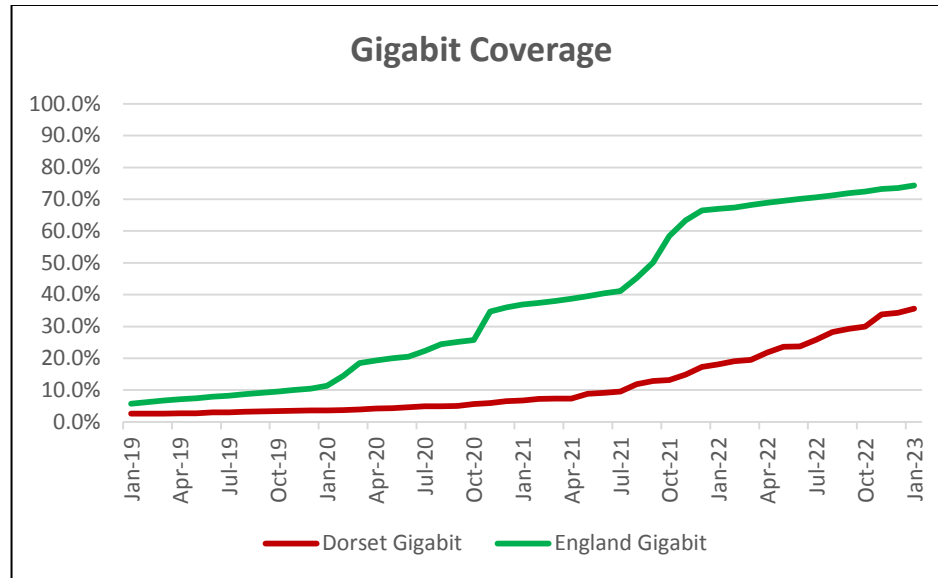
[Dorset's Economic Growth Strategy - Digital infrastructure - Dorset Council](#)

- 1.2 The context is of an increasingly digital society, with rising demand:

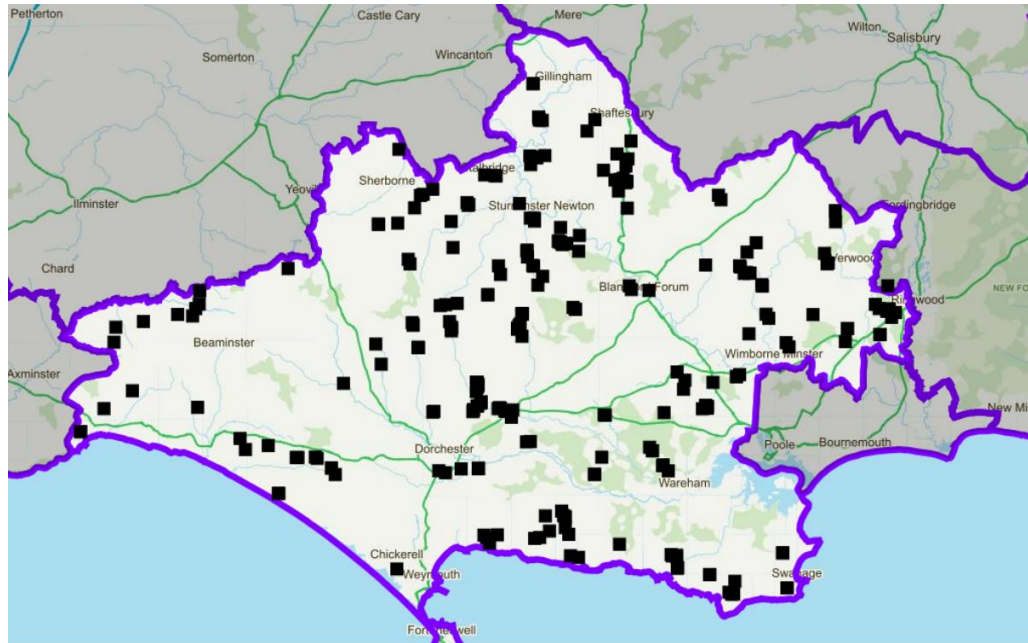
- Increasing socioeconomic activity online: in health and social care, education, business, retail and elsewhere
- Data requirements and use continue to rise very quickly.
- Lack of connectivity in rural areas an impediment to economic growth and social mobility.

- 1.3 The reality is that the economics of telecoms infrastructure deployment are challenging.

2. What has been done already



- 2.1 Dorset is well behind England as a whole for gigabit coverage and the contrast is even more stark with our urban neighbours in BCP Council where they have 83% coverage, compared with Dorset's 37%.
- 2.2 There is currently significant commercial activity building gigabit networks in Dorset; with a market which is much more diverse than has previously been the case. This is welcomed and to be encouraged, although we are seeing suppliers over-building in urban and market town areas increasing the risk to disruption on the highway.
- 2.3 Central and local government intervention continues to address some areas where commercial provision is not viable.
 - The Superfast Dorset programme has completed deployment
 - Two hubs contracts connecting schools, libraries and public buildings are complete and a third is in deployment
 - There is one [Project Gigabit](#) contract let in Dorset and a second procurement being prepared.
 - Subsidy schemes using vouchers continue, but at a slower pace due to Project gigabit procurements.



Dorset Mobile Not Spots – no service from all four mobile network operators – Dorset Council’s mobile drive test data

- 2.4 Mobile connectivity across Dorset is patchy for all four Mobile Network Operators, due to **rurality, low population densities** (making Dorset commercially unattractive) **and challenging geography**.
- 2.5 The Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (**DCIA**) programme has sought to improve access for network operators to Dorset Council assets for siting network infrastructure through a digital asset mapping platform during 2022/23.
- 2.6 Shared Rural Network (**SRN**) locations in the Dorset Council area have been identified and steps taken to support network operators in achieving the necessary permissions for these valuable shared mast sites.
- 2.7 There is a significant risk that coverage will degrade rather than improve in the medium term as **2G and 3G switch off** reduces the effective coverage from existing infrastructure.
- 2.8 Dorset is a **highly protected and designated landscape** which makes the deployment of fixed and mobile connectivity complex, time consuming and expensive. How can we strike the right balance between protecting Dorset’s unique environment while at the same time ensuring that we facilitate the improvements to digital infrastructure that modern communities and economies require?
- 2.9 National providers of fixed and mobile networks, working to national targets, will **prioritise locations that are easier, quicker and less**

costly. Dorset Council is not an attractive or easy partner for network providers to work with.

3. A Digital Infrastructure Strategy for Dorset

3.1 Digital transformation and digital infrastructure are well-referenced in Dorset Council's strategy and plans including the Council Plan, Digital Vision and Economic Growth Strategy. We have made good progress in relation to the actions that flow from those strategies. However, we recognise that there is much more to do:

- We need to demonstrate greater leadership in our relationship with the market. There are subtleties and complexities caused by our reliance on commercial provision; we need to influence the market.
- We need to maximise the benefit from interventions available to us (such as Project Gigabit) and maximise government grant, where available.
- We need to explore more radical solutions if we are to meet our ambitions

3.2 DSIT Strategy and Leadership Guidance for Local Authorities suggests as a minimum local authorities should:

3.2.1 **Champion** and advocate for connectivity within the council.

3.2.2 Bringing together **local teams** to focus on improving digital connectivity.

3.2.3 Translating ambition into **strategy**, stating both what we want and how we aim to deliver it.

3.2.4 Identifying both the **skills and resources** required within the Local Authority to deliver improved connectivity.

3.2.5 Pursuing **collaboration** with network providers to make Dorset easy to work with.

3.3 Our approach will be to:

3.3.1 **Facilitate roll out** of Digital Infrastructure, recognising Dorset is competing with other areas for network operator spend.

3.3.2 **Increase cooperation** with infrastructure providers and network operators, to enable network build at reduced time / cost for operators.

- 3.3.3 Encourage **planning for the future**, including driving a focus within the council on National Planning Policy Framework guidance and local plans, highlighting how they should both support the expansion of networks, creating incentives for future investment.
- 3.3.4 Promotion of **long-term investment** in Dorset by making ourselves easy to deal with and having clear and stable priorities understood by network providers.
- 3.3.5 **Identification and aggregation of public sector demand** for connectivity to potentially provide an anchor tenant for networks that are otherwise commercially unattractive.
- 3.3.6 **Investigate strategic partnerships** including potential for commercial return from investment.
- 3.3.7 **Transparent contact information** of key digital infrastructure stakeholders at Dorset Council.
- 3.3.8 **Access to Public Sector Assets** – providing a digital asset platform and encouraging network operators to make use of council assets.

4. **Timetable** for Digital Infrastructure Strategy consultation and engagement:

- Early May tbc - Officer workshop
- Early May tbc - Industry and key stakeholder workshop
- 06 June Place and Resources Overview committee - workshop style - Draft strategy
- xx July tbc - Show and Share
- 25 July Final strategy to Cabinet for approval

5. **Financial Implications**

- 5.1 None additional in the short term.
- 5.2 The delivery plan that will accompany the Digital Infrastructure Strategy will contain a costed programme.

6. **Environmental Implications**

- 6.1 The Natural Environment, Climate and Ecological priority for Dorset Council outlines that key focus areas for reducing Dorset's emissions includes better high-speed digital infrastructure and promoting digital

options. This will have the benefit of cutting the need for travel for personal, commuting, business and logistical reasons.

6.2 Specific areas for reduced travel include telemedicine, home working, online banking and online shopping which all depend heavily on digital connectivity. This will have the potential to **cut CO2 emissions, improve air quality in urban areas and tackle congestion** on Dorset's busy road network.

6.3 **Connected Places** – Internet of Things devices that monitor and report environmental data require connectivity. Smart Places can contribute to Net Zero ambitions through reductions in emissions from transport, agriculture and buildings, but only if the digital infrastructure is in place to support their use.

7. **Well-being and Health Implications**

7.1 **Social Isolation** – improving digital connectivity to communities reduces social isolation by connecting people to their families and friends, supporting reliable and effective online video calling, messaging and chat facilities that contribute to individual well-being.

7.2 **Tech Enabled Care** is a central element of the Adult Services transformation programme.

7.3 UK Government and OfCOM provide [advice and support](#) regarding 5G health effects. The council's infrastructure strategy should openly and confidently back improved fixed and wireless connectivity for Dorset communities and **counter misinformation**.

7.4 **PSTN (Public Switched Telephone Service) and Copper Switch off** – threatens to sunset a large number of legacy monitoring and alarm systems for vulnerable residents which depend upon a copper phone line for their connectivity in the medium term. Fibre and wireless alternatives will be part of the solution to support vulnerable people in their own homes in the future.

8. **Other Implications**

8.1 **Digital inclusion and innovation** - Digital infrastructure is the foundation for digitally transforming communities and economies. However, particularly for the vulnerable, access also means addressing skills needs, data poverty and access to devices. For the economy a focus on innovation and higher-level digital skills is needed. These are all part of

the Digital Place programme and an integral part of Dorset Council's Digital Vision.

8.2 **Property and Assets** - The Digital Infrastructure Strategy will **promote and encourage the use of council assets** for digital deployment.

8.3 **Planning**

8.3.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states planning authorities should **support the expansion of electronic communication networks**.

8.3.2 Local Plans should help create incentives for future investment for digital infrastructure by outlining how they **support the roll out of fixed and mobile infrastructure**.

8.3.3 More than 50% of Dorset Council area is designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with many other **designations and protections** in place to protect the landscape.

9. **Risk Assessment**

9.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: High/Medium

Residual Risk: Medium/Low

9.2 Fixed and mobile connectivity in Dorset may continue to lag behind national comparators.

9.3 The commercial roll-out of gigabit capable fibre may not continue as forecast.

9.4 The most hard to reach areas and premises may not be commercially viable, even with subsidy.

9.5 The benefits of digital connectivity to communities may not be given appropriate weight (As outlined in National Planning Policy Framework) compared to common designations and protections of our highly protected landscapes, meaning communities risk being disadvantaged digitally due to the protected landscape in which they live.

10. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

10.1 A comprehensive over-arching Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out to support the Digital Vision. This considers the impact of Digital Infrastructure: [Dorset Digital Vision EqIA - Dorset Council](#)

11. **Appendices**

None

12. **Background Papers**

[Dorset Council Cabinet, Dorset's Digital Vision Update, 28 February 2023](#)

[Dorset's Economic Growth Strategy - Digital infrastructure - Dorset Council](#)

[FarrPoint Digital Connectivity Survey 2023](#)

[Gov.uk Digital Strategy and Leadership Guidance](#) from DCMS

[National Planning Policy Framework 2021](#) Section 10. Supporting High Quality Communications

[advice and support – 5G Mobile Technology, a guide](#)