

Cabinet

5 September 2023

Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr J Haynes, Corporate Development and Transformation

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

The Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy outlines how Dorset Council will continue to reduce digital exclusion and inspire tech enterprise, providing better outcomes for individuals, the economy and society by:

- highlighting that digital connectivity and inclusion is important to everyone across the Dorset council area
- requiring resource and capacity from many teams to support delivery of the strategy,
- developing relationships with stakeholders such as network providers, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, the Integrated Care Board and others with an interest in reducing the digital divide
- making Dorset an easy place for suppliers to do business, ensuring further investment in Dorset becomes an attractive priority for business.

This strategy marks a watershed in ambition. Digital transformation and digital infrastructure are already well-referenced in Dorset Council's strategy and plans including the Council Plan, Digital Vision and Economic Growth Strategy, and good progress has been made. However, there is much more to do. Dorset Council has only limited powers and responsibilities in many of the areas where

action is required. Therefore, Dorset organisations and individuals will need to act collectively to achieve this wider ambition.

Dorset Council needs to:

- Demonstrate greater leadership in the council's relationships to influence the market.
- Maximise the benefit from interventions available to Dorset (such as Project Gigabit) and maximise government grant, where available.
- Explore more radical and innovative solutions to meet the council's ambitions for our residents, communities and businesses.

Simply, the vision for Dorset is that in this increasingly digital modern world no place, no community, no individual will be left behind.

Recommendations:

That Cabinet:

1. Reviews the final version of the Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy and delivery plan appended to this report and approves its adoption.
2. Delegates authority to Executive Director Corporate Development to identify an appropriate source of funding up to £374,000 per annum from the options identified in para 3.11 for the implementation of the Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion strategy.

Reason for Recommendation:

To support delivery of the Council Plan priority of driving economic prosperity and the cabinet commitment of digital innovation.

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

Aspiring to be a digital council, Dorset Council is seeking to roll out more digital services and are finding many vulnerable people, who need the council's services the most, are offline. The council will need to plan infrastructure upgrades and develop skills and inclusion programmes to ensure those hardest to reach have access to the same opportunities as better connected communities.

1. **Development of the Strategy**

- 1.1 Cabinet on 28 Feb 2023 endorsed the Dorset Digital Vision update and agreed to the development of a Digital Infrastructure Strategy to supplement the digital vision.
- 1.2 The Place and Resources Overview Committee provided councillor leadership in the development of this strategy. A paper and presentation was taken to the April meeting of the Overview committee.
- 1.3 Four Workshop sessions with stakeholders were held to inform and help develop the strategy
 - A councillor workshop, with councillors from the overview committee invited to attend
 - An officer workshop
 - A community and local stakeholder workshop
 - An on-line workshop with a wide selection of industry representatives
 - Young people were also consulted through the Dorset Youth Council.
- 1.4 Policy and strategy was researched through central government and Local Government Association policy papers and best practice in other local authority areas looked at.
- 1.5 A key improvement made to the overall objective of the strategy through its development was to add digital inclusion as a topic; outcomes cannot be achieved through infrastructure improvement in isolation.

2. **Delivery**

- 2.1 The strategy demonstrates the importance of digital infrastructure and inclusion, the contribution to Council transformation programmes, and the modernisation of the Dorset economy.
- 2.2 The Strategy underpins delivery of each of Dorset Council's five key priorities. Examples of how the Strategy implementation will help deliver each of the Council's five priorities include:

Driving Economic Prosperity:

- Digital connectivity is the foundation for future industries, jobs, skills and services. There is an increasing commercial reliance across

the economy on being able to connect with, and do business across, the internet.

- Those without digital skills earn less, with it estimated that those with digital skills increase earnings between 3% and 10%.

Creating stronger healthier communities:

- Digital solutions offer huge potential to aid the delivery of education, adult social care and health.
- The potential of connected care will only be realised if it is underpinned with good quality connectivity.
- Digital connectivity in schools supports children's learning

Creating sustainable development and housing

- Connected places can support sustainability through remote monitoring and control of systems, including smart heating systems, autonomous vehicles or EV charging all rely on digital connectivity.

Protecting our natural environment, climate and ecology

- Digital services enable communities to reduce transport emissions through increased homeworking, reducing impact on the environment of traffic and congestion.
- Smart sensors enable the collection of environmental data to create digital twins (virtual representations of real world scenarios) to monitor and manage things such as flood risk, extreme weather events and environmental stress.

Becoming a more responsive, customer focused council

- For as long as customers are unable to access digital services due to lack of digital infrastructure or digital exclusion the council will have to duplicate services on and offline at additional cost and run the risk that the digitally excluded access poorer standards of service to those offered to the digitally included.

2.3 Delivery of these five Council priorities has significant economic and social impact. In addition the potential for the council to achieve significant revenue savings and service improvements brought about by increased

use of digital connectivity, skills, and delivery, should not be underestimated.

2.4 The strategy sets out four digital themes for action:

- Inclusion and access
- Connectivity
- Innovation
- Leadership

With an additional cross-cutting theme of net zero.

2.5 Dorset Council has only limited powers and responsibilities in many of the areas where action is required. Therefore, Dorset organisations and individuals will need to act collectively to achieve this wider ambition.

2.6 The Council has a key role in facilitating the change required, broadly described by these four key areas:

Direct	Take direct action to deliver where there is market failure or Dorset Council's operational needs necessitate.
In-direct	Take indirect action to facilitate change by ensuring the range of services Dorset Council provides across the county support infrastructure deployment.
Influence and partnership	Work in partnership with communities, industry, and other organisations to drive delivery across the county through innovative approaches.
Lobbying	The council has a key role in lobbying government for clear policy and financial support.

2.7 The Council, through the Digital Place service, has a long and successful track record of delivering against the four areas identified above. A well resourced and embedded Digital Place service will be front and centre of this work; a core, specialist team able to support council objectives, take advantage of commercial opportunities, and successfully bid into external funding programmes that support delivery of this strategy.

3. **Financial Implications**

- 3.1 Recent national research by the Digital Connectivity alliance has reinforced the roles the councils have in enabling digital connectivity [Local-Authorities-as-Connectivity-Enablers-Report.pdf \(connectivityuk.org\)](https://connectivityuk.org).
- 3.2 Additionally, the council has significant aspirations to become a digitally enabled authority, changing the way it delivers services to take account of the opportunities and efficiencies offered by digital connectivity and delivery. This has significant potential to deliver further revenue savings and service improvements through the adoption of new technology supported by digital infrastructure and skilled staff.
- 3.3 The Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy demonstrates the potential for commercial opportunities for the council to deliver significant economic and social benefits and to generate revenue returns from capital investment in digital infrastructure.
- 3.4 Dorset Council's aspiration to be a Digital Place relies on working digitally with our communities, businesses and visitors – this relies on digital connectivity and inclusion that is delivered by the work of the Digital Place team.
- 3.5 Although there will be an impact on a wide variety of council services, the service with the primary responsibility to deliver this strategy is the Digital Place service. This team has evolved from solely project-based work to an increasingly mature service supporting council plan priorities with on-going activities, policy responsibilities, strategy and service delivery, business plan development and an enviable track record of securing external funding.
- 3.6 Whilst the service has evolved and needs to evolve further to implement this strategy, the budget for the service has not evolved. In successive years the budget has comprised of capital funding, transformation funding, external funding and a small core revenue budget.
- 3.7 The core revenue budget contributes to around a quarter of the total staff budget. This leads to a reliance on external funding to deliver the service with subsequent uncertainty and risk around staff futures and retention and recruitment of key officers.
- 3.8 To take advantage of commercial opportunities and to respond to the more technical relationships to be held with digital infrastructure companies, it is necessary to invest in a number of officer posts that will

improve and retain the technical and commercial capabilities of the Digital Place team.

- 3.9 It is considered that securing funding the Digital Place team, for a number of years, will significantly derisk the council's aspirations to deliver digital place and future service delivery. To successfully deliver the aspirations and opportunities identified within the Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy, the Digital Place core budget needs to be re-balanced to account for the greater resource requirements.
- 3.10 The required level of revenue funding to support the Digital Place team over a five year period to implement the Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion strategy has been modelled by the Digital Place Service Manager with assistance from finance colleagues and is set out below:

Current	£K
Core - revenue funding	290
Project funding (Transformation, capital, external funding)	554
total staffing cost of service	773
Proposed	
Core revenue funding (Comprising existing revenue funding and an additional £374k revenue)	664
Project funding (external funding - scaleable)	469
total cost of service	1,133
<u>Full year annual revenue difference</u>	<u>374</u>
<u>Additional core cost over 5 years to March 2029</u>	<u>1,870</u>

- 3.11 There are a number of potential options to secure the level of revenue budget support required to deliver the staffing and operational changes necessary to deliver the Digital Strategy and capitalise on the arising commercial opportunities. These include:
1. Secure external funding. This is reliant on the council successfully bidding for appropriate government and other grant support. Whilst Dorset has a very good track record of securing external finance this is usually capital and targeted at particular needs and the council would not have full control over the application of the funds to meet the local needs and maximise commercial opportunities.
 2. Use of the Invest to Save budget which recognises the significant potential for the council to make either revenue savings through

digital delivery of services or to take advantage of commercial opportunities using digital infrastructure that delivers a revenue income.

3. Additional council core revenue funding awarded through the council's agreed budget setting process.
4. More flexible use of 'gainshare' returned through legacy co-investment in the superfast programme to fund core Digital Place team staffing revenue costs.

3.12 The preferred option to fund the required revenue budget is through a more flexible use of gainshare. Gainshare has arisen where the council's superfast contracts with Openreach have returned greater revenue to the supplier than that envisaged when the contract was signed.

3.13 Over the post-deployment term of those contracts, it is estimated that Dorset's share of the remaining available gainshare will be approximately £3m although this figure is dependent on a number of variables such as final levels of take up.

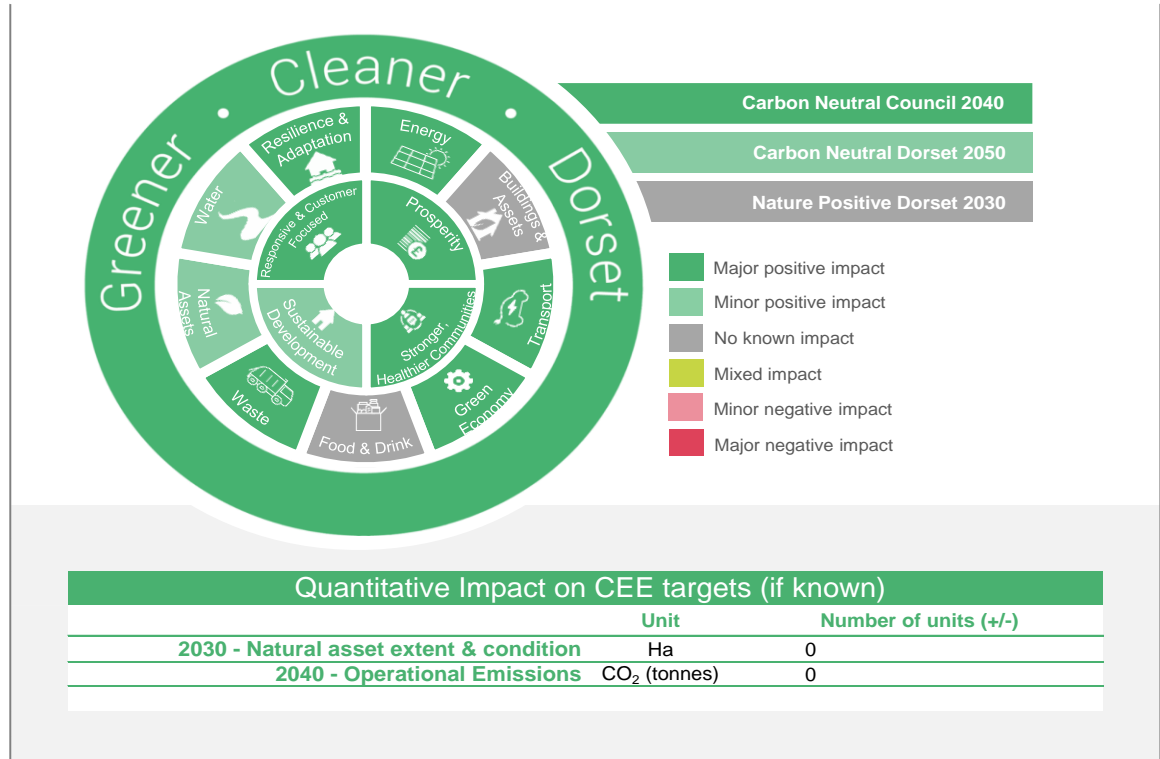
3.14 There will continue to be a requirement to secure external funding to deliver the capital element of the strategy, principally new digital infrastructure in the form of fibre, masts, and other technologies. Importantly this investment in the Digital Place team will, due to the increased capacity to develop new business cases and funding bids, improve the likelihood of successfully bidding for further external funds (whatever the source) and lead to Dorset further improving its reputation as a county where digital innovation can take place.

3.15 **Risk:** Dorset Council has an enviable record in securing external funding and this will remain an important component of the funding needed to deliver this strategy. However, external funding is competitive and volatile and how such funding is directed in support of the council's digital place strategy is uncertain and outside of the council's control. Consequently over-reliance on this funding route is considered high risk with regard to achievement of the council's Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy.

3.16 **Management:** It should also be noted that responsibility for delivery of this strategy lies not only within the Digital Place team. Other services contribute to achievement and need to prioritise and resource activity appropriately. This includes, but is not limited to Planning, Highways, Assets and Property, Economic Development, the Transformation,

Innovation, Digital and Environment service and corporate support services.

4. **Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**



4.12 **Reduced travel** – telemedicine, home working, online banking, online shopping all depend heavily on digital connectivity and have the potential to reduce the demand for transport, cutting CO₂ emissions, improving air quality in urban areas and tackling congestion on Dorset’s busy road network.

4.13 **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.

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

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

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.

6. **Other Implications**

6.12 None

7. **Risk Assessment**

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

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Low

8. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

8.12 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](#)

9. **Appendices**

Dorset's Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy 2023 to 2030

Digital Place High Level Delivery Plan July 2023

Climate Change Wheel - Accessible Impact Assessment & Table of Recommendations

10. **Background Papers**

[Dorset Council's roles in ensuring better broadband and mobile coverage across Dorset - Developing a Digital Infrastructure Strategy Place and Resources Overview committee – 18 April 2023](#)

[Dorset Council Plan 2022 – 2024](#)

[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

[The local government digitalisation almanac - A simple guide for local councils \(LGA 2023\)](#)

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

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