

Dorset's Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy 2023 to 2030



Dorset
Council

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FOREWORD



I am really pleased to present and support Dorset Council's first Digital infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy.

Digital connectivity is a key foundation for the future of our county. Digital underpins and influences all our personal lives, communities and economy. It is essential we promote and enable first-class digital infrastructure to achieve the widespread adoption of digital technologies.

This is a major infrastructure programme, as vital to 21st century Dorset as the roads and railways were to our predecessors. We acknowledge that building modern telecoms infrastructure is technical, challenging and often expensive. True partnership with Government, industry, public sector partners and our communities will be needed to build the infrastructure needed to transform our society; but build it we must.

Current commercial digital infrastructure expansion is welcomed and significant in Dorset. Government investment and co-investment in broadband infrastructure will help target and support our rural communities. Even with these meaningful programmes and best intentions Dorset continues to lag behind the rest of the UK and the promise of good mobile connectivity remains a long way from people's lived experience.

Whilst many of us take for granted access to the internet and the opportunities it brings, sadly many are not able to partake in the digital society. That exclusion is damaging to individuals and to our economy. Digital exclusion often aligns with other indicators of deprivation; transforming our health and care services digitally goes hand in hand with a relentless focus on reducing our off-line population.

This strategy marks a watershed in our 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. 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 relationships 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 and innovative solutions if we are to meet our ambitions.

This is not only about infrastructure to enable clean, inclusive growth and prosperity, but also about raising the prospects of those who are struggling to make digital Dorset a great place to live, work and visit. The vision for Dorset is that in this increasingly digital modern world no place, no community, no individual will be left behind.

Thank you to fellow councillors, officers, community stakeholders and industry for working with us to put this strategy together.



Cllr Jill Haynes
**Portfolio Holder for Corporate Development
and Transformation
Dorset Council**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This 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 council
- requiring resource and capacity from many teams to adopt digital inclusion principles, such as holding contractors to the highest standards
- 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 to work, ensuring further investment in Dorset becomes an attractive priority for business.



INTRODUCTION

Strategic Background in Dorset

[Dorset Council's plan](#) contains a chapter on 'Understanding Dorset'. All of this is relevant context to this strategy and sets the baselines from which Dorset Council will be able to measure the outcomes that will come from implementing this strategy.

Employment - Employment in Dorset is high but, like the UK, Dorset's economy has a productivity gap.

Productivity - Dorset is less competitive than the national average, not having well paid jobs or large industries. GVA (Gross Value Added) per hour worked is [lower in Dorset than it is in the South West or nationally](#). For every hour worked Dorset produces almost 19% less than the UK average.

In recent years [competitiveness has worsened](#).

Socioeconomic Factors - Fourteen neighbourhoods in Dorset are in the 20% most deprived nationally for employment with 10 of these in the former borough of Weymouth & Portland. Twenty-five neighbourhoods are among the most deprived for education, skills and training. Dorset ranks particularly poorly for deprivation associated with barriers to housing and services, with 66 areas ranking among the most deprived in the country for this measure. The South Dorset Parliamentary Constituency has the lowest levels of social mobility of all 533 constituencies in England.

Population - [Dorset has a population of 379,584](#). Over the next decade, the population aged 16-64 will shrink by 0.2% per annum. That's a net loss of over 3,600 people in this age group. In contrast, the proportion of the population aged 65+ continues to grow; from 25% in 2011 to 30% in 2021 and a projected figure of 35% in 2031. The old age dependency ratio is expected to increase from 537 per 1,000 in 2020 [to 655 per 1,000 in 2029](#).

Benefits of Digital Connectivity and Inclusion

[Digital infrastructure projects are proven to increase the GVA of an area](#) and can help address the challenges outlined above.

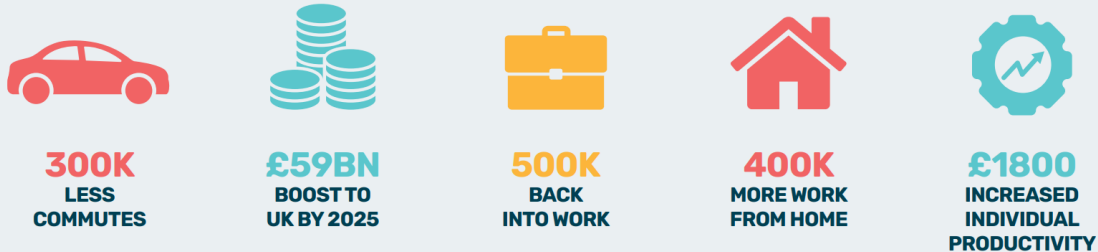
UK Government International Technology Strategy states "Science and technology will be the major driver of prosperity, power and history-making events this century. The United Kingdom's future success as a rich, strong, influential country, whose citizens enjoy prosperity and security, and fulfilled, healthy and sustainable lives, will correspondingly depend on our ability to build on our existing strengths in science, technology, finance and innovation. "

There is a clear link between the digital infrastructure and data capabilities of an area and both economic growth and social opportunity ([Openreach 'Full fibre broadband: A platform for growth'](#)).

In a county with poor physical connectivity, investment in digital is even more important, particularly if Dorset is to provide permanent, high skilled and high wage jobs for young people and prevent them from leaving the county after education.



EFFECT OF FULL FIBRE BROADBAND UK WIDE



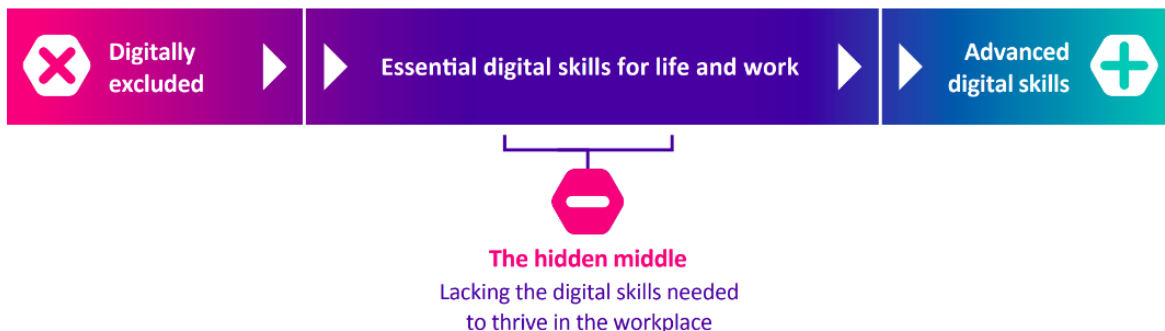
The case for digital inclusion is as compelling as for digital infrastructure.

Digital skills are essential for most of us in our everyday lives. Although digital exclusion has reduced overall, the divide itself has worsened, with the most vulnerable lagging further behind. There is a £9.48 return for every £1 invested in digital inclusion (Cebr 2022, [The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK \(goodthingsfoundation.org\)](#))

People's digital needs in order to prosper are now set out in the minimum digital living standard. It includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.' ([Developing a New Benchmark: A Minimum Digital Living Standard \(goodthingsfoundation.org\)](#))

People need additional skills in order to participate fully in today's workforce; currently 59% of the UK workforce can't complete all the digital tasks that government and business agree are essential for the workplace. This skills gap is damaging the UK's competitiveness and productivity. ([The Hidden Middle - FutureDotNow](#))

The spectrum of digital skills



Digital skills and connectivity are vital for delivering services as well as for economic growth. When technology is embedded seamlessly into care and support it can be transformative, improving people's



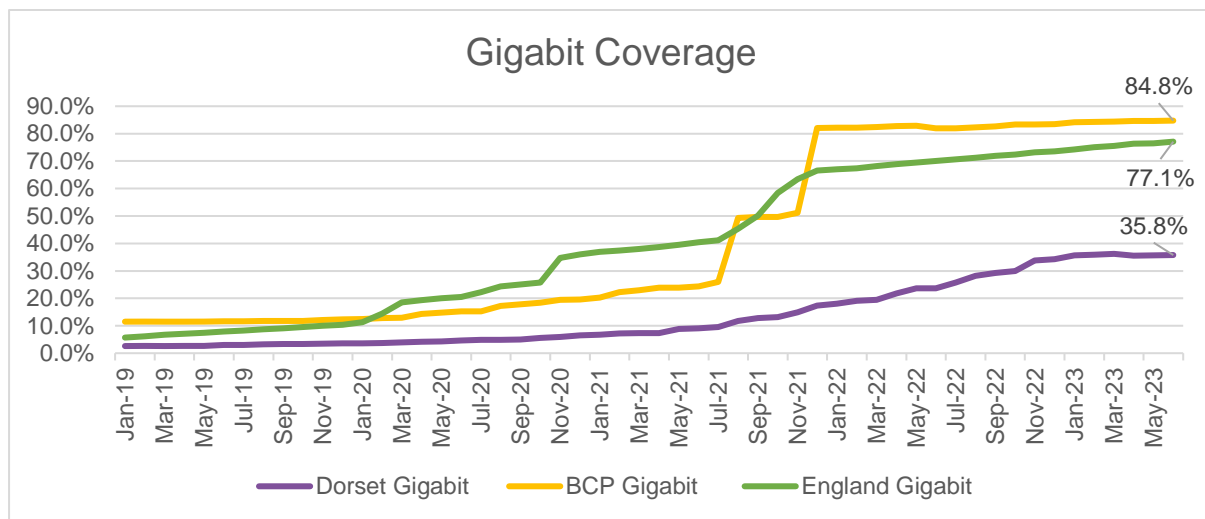
quality of life and ensuring information is readily available to help staff provide the right care in the right place at the right time. ([Digital working in adult social care: What Good Looks Like - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#))

Of patients receiving digital care, 21% had fewer visits to their GP for minor ailments. ([From Exclusion to Inclusion: Guest Blog - Mobile UK \(techuk.org\)](#)).

Current position

Commercial delivery of infrastructure is difficult in a rural area like Dorset (demographics, topography, commercial modelling) so Dorset needs to make it as attractive and easy as possible for business to invest, otherwise they will go elsewhere.

These difficulties are demonstrated by the fact that the Dorset Council area has far lower gigabit coverage than the national average.



[Dorset also has some of the worst mobile phone coverage in the UK.](#)

Dorset is seeing a significant growth in the deployment of gigabit capable fibre, with a much more diversified market, and BDUK 'Project Gigabit' contracts. However, much more still needs to be done to close the gap in Dorset and provide the foundation for digital transformation of the economy.

- Dorset needs to demonstrate greater leadership in relationships with the market. There are subtleties and complexities caused by Dorset's reliance on commercial provision; Dorset needs to influence the market.



- Dorset needs to maximise the benefit from interventions available (such as Project Gigabit) and maximise government grant, where available.
- Dorset needs to explore more radical solutions to meet proposed ambitions.

In the coming years telecoms operators, with the support and agreement of central Government, will be carrying out a range of connectivity “switch-offs”, including copper broadband delivered down phone lines plus 2G and 3G mobile services. This may have a disproportionate impact on rural areas such as Dorset, potentially increasing the digital divide further, holding back economic growth and social development.

These switch-offs put the growth of innovation, investment and social opportunity in Dorset at risk.

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.





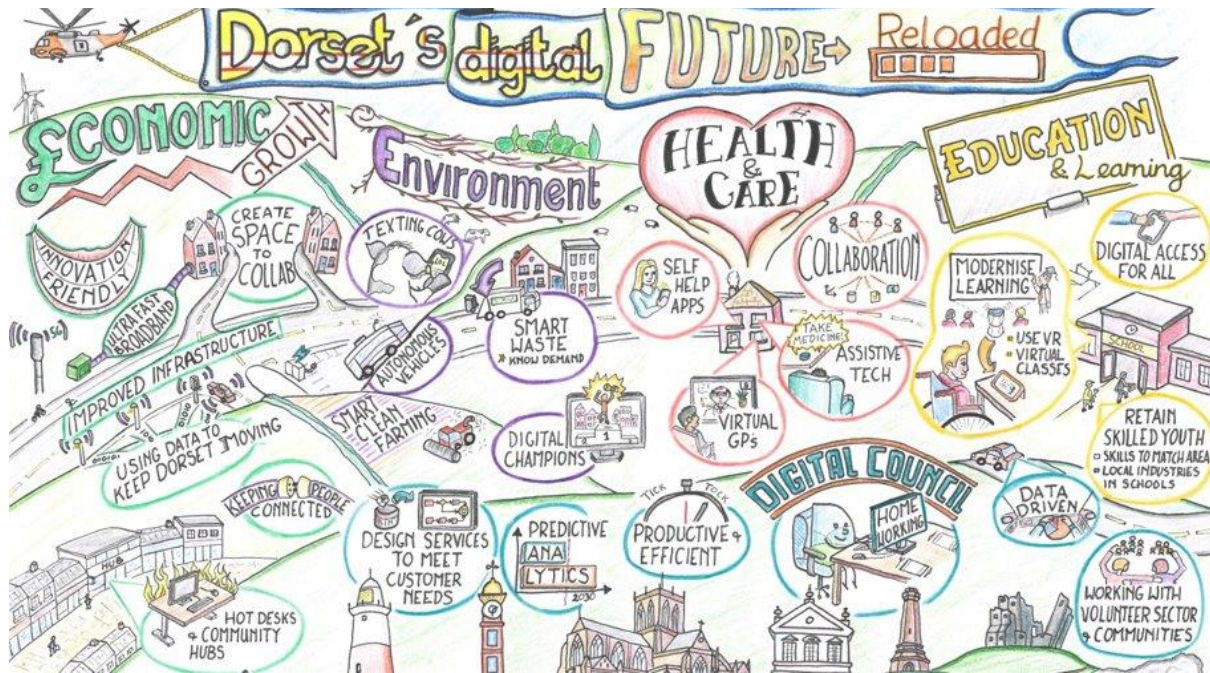
Aspiring to be a digital council, Dorset Council is seeking to roll out more digital services and finding many vulnerable people, who need our services the most, are offline. Similarly the Integrated Care Board is struggling to get people to adopt digital health technologies.

Dorset suffers from a digital skills gap in all sectors and at all levels as identified in the draft Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan. Vacancies are high in a variety of sectors which rely on technology, including health, advanced engineering, manufacturing and construction. Qualified software developer/engineer was the fifth most in demand job in Dorset in 2022 and has been for the past few years.



VISION AND GOALS

Digital infrastructure & inclusion drives economic prosperity, and social opportunity through digital connectivity, innovation, skills and leadership for places, businesses, and residents to make Dorset a better place to live, work, and visit.



Fast fixed and mobile infrastructure is vital to connect people and organisations, providing a foundation from which to deliver transformational change to services, communities and to the economy of Dorset.

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

Digital connectivity and inclusion are important to everyone across the council and will require resource and capacity from many teams to hold contractors to the highest standards while maintaining / restoring relationships with network providers and ensuring further investment in Dorset becomes an attractive priority for business.

- By 2030, Dorset will be a digital place with connected communities and opportunities for all.
- This means ubiquitous high-speed connectivity either through fibre or wirelessly to all premises, however hard to reach.
- An estimated £300 million is to be invested in Dorset by businesses providing digital infrastructure – Through an effective Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion strategy Dorset should seek to 'lock in' and further expand this investment, preventing it going elsewhere in the future.



DELIVERING THROUGH DORSET COUNCIL

Our Approach

This strategy sets out the framework for action and the direction of travel needed for a county-wide approach. There will be many technological and policy developments along the way, opportunities for funding, commercial challenges and external influences. Dorset will, therefore, need to remain flexible and review this strategy regularly to take account of the latest developments.

To separate the big issues into manageable programmes and action plans, delivery has been split **into four digital themes**:

- **Inclusion and access**
- **Connectivity**
- **Innovation**
- **Leadership**

With an additional cross-cutting theme of **net zero**.

A section on each of these themes sets out the key challenges and priority areas for action. From this strategy and consultation with the public, Dorset's 'Digital Place' team have developed more detailed action plans and will engage with partners, organisations, and individuals to encourage wider action beyond Dorset Council.

The 'Digital Place' team will monitor and report progress bi-annually against strategy, action plans and budgets, as well as with those of the broader council, to ensure enough progress is being made or where greater focus is required to keep on track. The action plans will be living documents that will be regularly updated to account for progress, availability of resources and changes in policy and technology. The strategy itself will be reviewed, either if it becomes clear that not enough progress is being made against the targets, or when the actions are largely complete and new ones need to be established.



Dorset Council's role

Dorset Council is committed to continuing the journey towards a connected and inclusive digital Dorset; no place, no community, no individual will be left behind.

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.

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.

Example: 'Hub and Spoke' activity providing high speed fibre connectivity to libraries and Volunteer Digital Champions offering digital skills support in libraries to support digital inclusion.



Indirect (through services)

Take indirect action to facilitate change by ensuring the range of services Dorset provides across the county support infrastructure deployment.

This will include planning, housing, economic development and transport, all of which can contribute to achievement of this strategy.

Example: Investment in additional resource by the Roadspace team to better support greater network build activity



Influence and partnership

Work in partnership with communities and other organisations to drive delivery across the county and put in place larger programmes and projects to support fundamental change required.

Example: Voucher scheme promotion/co-ordination/encouragement, community solution pilots

working with industry through innovative commercial partnerships



Lobbying

The council has a key role in lobbying government for clear policy and financial support.

Example: Actively participate in national forums and consultations on policy development.

Much of what is required will need to be led by national government through clear policy and support programmes (including financial incentives). Principally through:

- DSIT - Department of Science, Innovation and Technology
- OFCOM



Dorset Council's Strategic Priorities

Digital infrastructure and digital inclusion contribute to achievement of each of Dorset Council's five key priorities for 2022-



Driving Economic Prosperity

- Digital connectivity is the foundation for future industries, jobs, skills and services.
- 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
- Children with disabilities need digital connectivity to support independent travel



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.
- Digital twins enable collection of environment data from sensors 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.



THEMES



Access & Inclusion



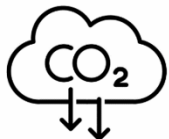
Connectivity



Innovation



Leadership



Net Zero





Access and Inclusion

In the Dorset Council area:

10% of residents are digitally excluded

20% don't have foundational digital skills

“Digital exclusion in a digital world is a health inequality challenge: it reflects, creates, and compounds health and wider inequalities. There is no single or silver bullet solution. (Good-Things-Foundation-2021—[Digital-Exclusion-and-Health-Inequalities-Briefing-Paper.pdf](#) ([goodthingsfoundation.org](#)))

Collaboration, more leadership from government, and better understanding of the links between digital and health are required for better outcomes.” (Health inequalities and digital exclusion ([goodthingsfoundation.org](#))) [UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy - GOV.UK](#) ([www.gov.uk](#))

Being online has economic benefits to the individual (up to £700/year), local businesses (by upskilling the workforce) and communities more generally. There are important social benefits to individuals of being better connected and able to access services.

- Support for the rollout of key digital services by the council and its partners increases efficiency and saves money, freeing up resource for people who need individual/specialist help to access services.
- Working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector is a critical part of delivering digital inclusion. It creates communities of interest and promotes independent problem solving. Dorset is seen as a trailblazer for digital inclusion.
- Improving businesses' access to a digitally-skilled workforce increases productivity, economic growth and a more highly paid economy.



By 2025 we will...



Drive down digital exclusion in Dorset through providing access to skills support from volunteers, trained front-line staff embedded in key customer-focused roles and the voluntary sector.



Have a sustainable programme working with partners to provide devices to people otherwise unable to access the internet.



Tackle digital exclusion in a joined-up way, collaborating with partners such as the Dorset Integrated Care Board and voluntary, social and community enterprises, using data to better understand the offline communities, building capacity in the council's frontline staff and partner voluntary and community sector organisations, helping service users improve their digital skills.



Work with partners, especially the Integrated Care Board, to support the rollout of specific digital services across the system, including digitisation of social care, digital health technologies etc.



Have an effective and mature Dorset Digital Skills Partnership to co-ordinate, promote and develop digital skills for Dorset's workforce at a basic, intermediate and advanced level.



Provide our young people with Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) experiences, raise awareness of the opportunities of higher-paid STEM careers in Dorset and help teachers provide coding learning opportunities in line with the national curriculum.

By 2030 we intend to...



Ensure Dorset residents all have the new connectivity and have access to the support networks to develop skills and motivation to use it, to improve their lives and the productivity of businesses.



Enable offline residents who want to get online to do so through the rollout of scalable, sustainable programmes of device and data-giving.





Embed digital inclusion into all digital transformation projects and programmes, so all members of our community have the access and skills needed to engage with and benefit from an emerging digital society.



Expand existing partnerships that ensure young people of all ages get the support they need to have a digitally enabled career in Dorset.

"Where I live (near Blandford) the internet connection is quite bad and generally doesn't work (slow and goes down often). This makes completing online homework difficult. At school we have terrible internet connection the teachers struggle during lessons to teach due to slow and bad internet (Blandford) It delays the register being taken as well as general teaching"





Connectivity

Connectivity has brought benefits for British households and British business, boosting growth, productivity, and opportunity for all. And change shows no sign of stopping. In fact, we find ourselves on the brink of a new revolution which promises to transform the world once more.

UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

- Advanced fixed and wireless connectivity is the foundation on which future industries, jobs, skills and services will be delivered. It is fundamental to Dorset's stated vision, economy and society.
- Without modern, secure networks we can't take advantage of transformative technologies from AI to connected and self-driving vehicles, or realise smart place opportunities to deliver cleaner, less congested places or deliver cheaper, more personalised healthcare.
- Working effectively in partnership with industry helps achieve responsible and sustainable commercial delivery programmes, championing community benefit while safeguarding public assets.
- Dorset needs a local planning system that balances the economic/community benefits of fixed and mobile infrastructure with protecting the built and natural environment.
- The council can encourage take-up of digital services including faster broadband through communications campaigns.



By 2025 we will...



Participate in national programmes that drive UK policy around fixed and wireless connectivity and deliver legacy networks that help close the digital divide, maintaining Dorset's capabilities as an effective delivery partner for central Government connectivity initiatives/maximising utilisation of external funding opportunities



Have agreed a programme of smart investment in our own networks to deliver connectivity that meets the needs of those who live in, work in and visit Dorset.



Work with elected representatives to challenge barriers to world class connectivity in areas such as ours.





Have established reliable base data for mobile coverage across the county.



match the government coverage target for gigabit broadband.

By 2030 we intend to...



Embed council processes that encourage inward investment by digital infrastructure partners.



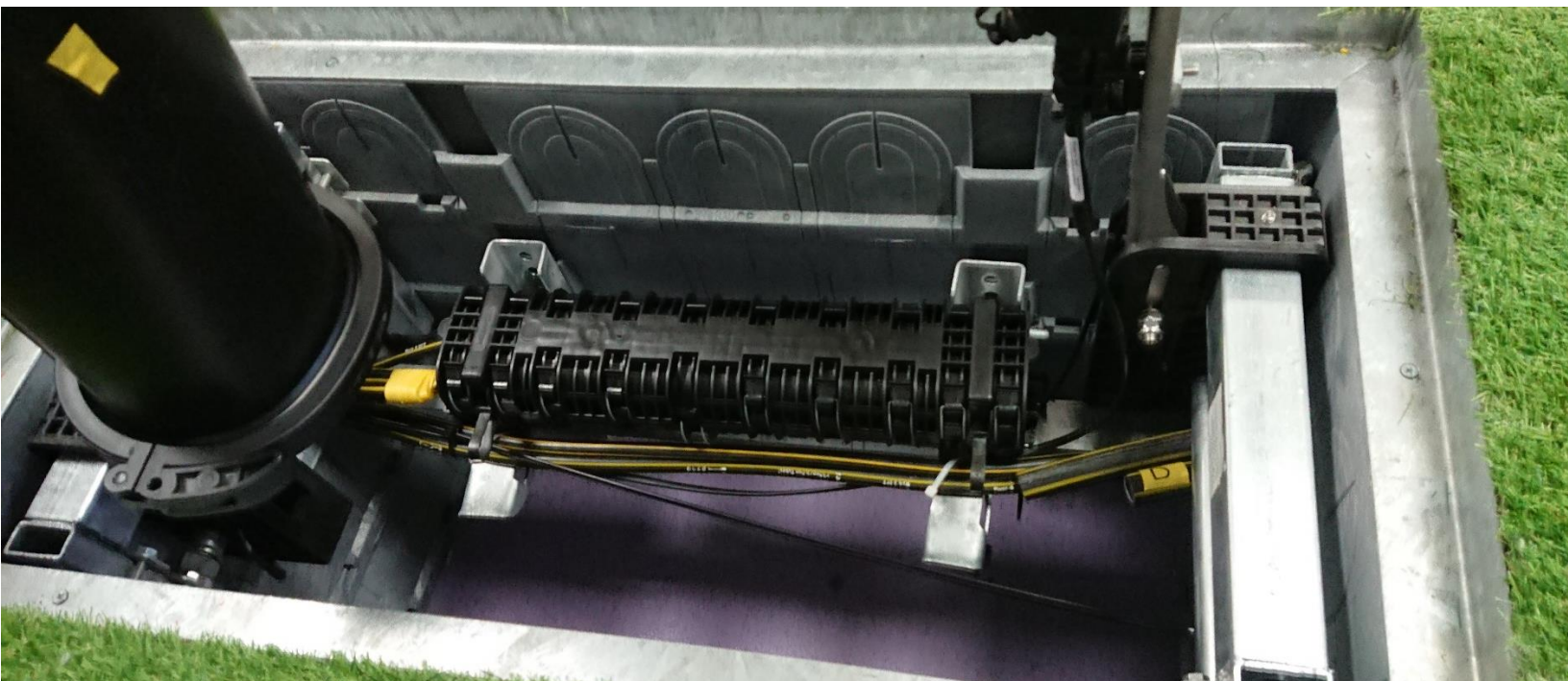
Make all suitable assets available.



Achieve demonstrable improvements in mobile coverage.



Drive Gigabit broadband to every premise practicable with alternative solutions available to every home and business who wants it.





Innovation

Digital innovation is a priority for Dorset Council. The Council Plan commits the council to “continue to pioneer new technologies and create the foundations of longer-term economic development. Work to safeguard and encourage job retention and growth through direct action and positive engagement with the private sector.” (Dorset Council Plan to 2024)

- Dorset needs digital infrastructure and skills development programmes to develop a digital innovation ecosystem which can help solve the county’s/UK’s biggest challenges, from defending the nation and looking after our communities’ most vulnerable individuals to food production and environmental protection.
- Life is changing faster than ever before and the opportunities to use technology to improve health outcomes far outstrip our ability to implement them



Rather than try and do everything ourselves and to enable us to tap into the opportunities of emerging technology, we need to work with a range of businesses/suppliers. To innovate requires agility and we need to be prepared to challenge our internal ways of working to enable us to move quickly when opportunities present themselves.

Dorset Council Cabinet, Dorset’s Digital Vision Update, 28 February 2023

By 2025 we will...



Have reviewed and agreed the role of alternative delivery models, including Special Purpose Vehicles, in achieving a faster paced and more commercial approach to digital innovation



Develop a digital innovation ecosystem which can provide solutions to many of Dorset and the UK’s grand challenges



Be effectively using Dorset Council assets to achieve these aims, including Dorset Innovation Park, the council-owned buildings on the site and one public estate buildings



By 2030 we intend to...



Create new, high skilled, high wage jobs by incubating start-ups and rooting them in Dorset.



Generate revenue for Dorset Council and prosperity/growth for its area.



Put prevention at the core of what we do, addressing inequalities and helping communities manage their own health and wellbeing, reducing unsustainable loads on Dorset's health and care services



Fuse genomics, digital medicine, AI and robotics, enabling staff to deliver a more holistic approach to personalised healthcare and disease prevention.





Leadership

Local authorities are hugely important to mobile infrastructure deployment and are in a significant position to accelerate mobile and gigabit rollout. Their role lies in setting local strategy and policy around digital connectivity, raising awareness, championing connectivity, and coordinating both internally and externally with the council itself and telecommunications providers.

Building Mobile Britain: The Case for Local Authority Digital Champions – Mobile UK,

[6273e1737caa08e351ba5dfe_Digital-Champions.pdf \(webflow.com\)](#)

The key responsibility of Dorset Council is to provide strategic leadership, providing a coordinated facilitation role in ensuring private sector investment in digital infrastructure is maximised.

Commercial investment

This partnership approach is critical in achieving the goal of significant private sector investment in our county. We must provide a path of least resistance to fixed and mobile network operators, supplying them with all appropriate information equally and consistently remove barriers to digital infrastructure delivery wherever this is practically possible.

Partnership with government

Applying for central government funding and managing delivery of any resultant intervention programmes aimed at improving availability of full-fibre and 5G mobile.

The Dorset Digital Skills Partnership, set up by Dorset Council and bringing together skills providers, businesses requiring skills and digital leaders, provides leadership in workforce digital skills development across the wider Dorset area and the south-west.



By 2025 we will...



Be first nationally with connectivity, skills, inclusion and innovation initiatives



Speak regularly at national conferences on digital inclusion, innovation and other key issues.



Win awards for our work to make Dorset a digital place.



Hold events such as the Festival of the Future and others which attract a national and international spotlight on Dorset's digital initiatives.



Enable network operator access to public sector assets such as ducts, street furniture, & rooftops



Take a strategic approach to use of public sector assets to achieve maximum benefit rather than short term financial benefits



Map potential public sector assets and make available to fixed/mobile network operators

By 2030 we intend to...



Lead digital initiatives at a local, regional and national level.



Be recognised locally and further afield as one of the country's best digital rural regions thanks to the digital connectivity, skills, inclusion and innovation that happens here.

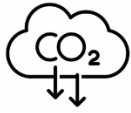


Have strong relationships between our many tech businesses and their local schools, giving students the chance to experience what a career in technology might be like



Have a strong cohort of young people who aspire to working in the Dorset tech sector.





Net Zero

“It is not possible to meet net-zero greenhouse gas emissions targets, grow the economy and care for the social wellbeing of the nation without digital.”

FarrPoint

“For every tonne of greenhouse gas emissions emitted to deliver the UK’s digital infrastructure ambitions, up to 8 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions could be saved in the long term”

In one of its first actions Dorset Council declared a climate emergency in May 2019. Dorset committed in its Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy to achieving a carbon-neutral council by 2040, working towards the whole of Dorset becoming carbon-neutral by 2050.

Sensitive and thoughtful deployment of infrastructure can have a positive effect on achieving a carbon neutral Dorset. Initial assessment has suggested that this could include key areas such as:

- The green and blue economy
- Transport
- Food and drink
- Resilience and adaptation

By 2025 we will...



Understand and measure the contribution digital infrastructure and inclusion programmes can contribute to the council's 2040 net zero ambitions

By 2030 we intend to...



support net zero programmes delivered wholly or in part through digital infrastructure or inclusion that measurably contribute to achieving the 2040 net zero goal



Host networks and sensors to understand climate impacts on wider programmes

