

Cabinet

3 March 2026

Working with communities For Decision

Cabinet Member:

Cllr N Ireland, Leader of the Council, Climate, Performance and Safeguarding

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

S Crowe, Director of Public Health & Prevention

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

- 1.1 Closer working with our communities and partners, including parish and town councils, is essential for Dorset Council to deliver its council plan ambitions under the Communities for All priority. This paper asks cabinet to approve a Statement of Reasonable Expectations that articulates how we can foster closer working with parish and town councils, and a programme of community conversations designed to strengthen how Dorset Council works in neighbourhoods.
- 1.2 Two factors underline why we need to work more closely with communities. First, the Communities for All priority in the council plan, which was a clear response to evidence we have heard from residents and partners that the council has not always been easy to work with. This was coupled to a perception of remoteness and a lack of join up in how we meet community needs effectively and efficiently.
- 1.3 Second, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, at committee stage in the House of Lords, sets out a requirement for unitary councils to establish neighbourhood governance. The Bill's intent is to move

decision-making closer to residents, so that decisions are made by people who best understand their local needs.

- 1.4 Officers have been working with People and Resources Overview since November 2025 on the Statement.... and town councils. Therefore a revised version is presented in Appendix A for recommendation to Cabinet.
- 1.5 The rationale and context for the recommendation to adopt the Statement of Reasonable Expectations goes beyond the development of services and assets for double devolution. It recognises the importance of the programme of planned conversations with communities, ward members, parish and town councils, the voluntary and community sector and other partners. These 'Community Conversations' are planned to take place throughout 2026. Externally, this will help shape neighbourhood governance and options for double devolution, as well as better understand community needs. Internally, the conversations will inform how we work differently as a council, aligning more joined up services in localities and developing a one-council prevention approach to better achieve outcomes for residents, in a financially sustainable way.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to consider and approve the Community Conversations approach outlined in this paper, which supports how we will work with communities to deliver the Council Plan objectives and prepare for the English Devolution and Community Empowerment legislation.
- 2.2 Cabinet is also asked to approve that the revised Statement of Reasonable Expectations between Dorset Council and parish and town councils be signed by the Leader of Dorset Council and adopted.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 To enable Dorset Council to strengthen partnership working with town and parish councils, and key community partners including the voluntary and community sector, as we understand how to best meet community needs and improve outcomes for residents in a sustainable and effective way. This will help us deliver the objectives under 'Communities for All' in our council plan, and prepare for policy changes that are emerging from the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.

4. The report

4.1 Closer working with communities is essential if Dorset Council is to deliver the objectives of the Communities for All ambition under the Council Plan. The three priorities under Communities for All are:

- a) to be more active in local communities;
- b) to become a better partner;
- c) improve connection and collaboration between council directorates;

This report and recommendation supports delivery of all three priorities, with an emphasis on 1 and 2.

4.2 The first year of the Communities for All programme was largely about building relationships, gathering evidence from partners, and understanding opportunities to work differently, with a close connection to the Our Future Council transformation programme.

4.3 Now we are moving to delivery. This includes developing a locality model of working, a single council approach to prevention, and strengthening partnerships with town and parish councils, the voluntary and community sector and health partners to improve outcomes for residents.

4.4 A programme of Community Conversations is planned which will help strengthen how Dorset Council works in neighbourhoods. The conversations will help shape ideas about neighbourhood governance, options for double devolution, as well as provide information on internal changes needed to work more effectively in neighbourhoods. Importantly they will enable local ideas recognising there is no 'one size fits all' approach for communities across Dorset.

4.5 There are local and national drivers behind this need to work more closely with communities. Firstly, we cannot deliver the Communities for All priorities without involving communities in identifying needs and solutions together.

4.6 Secondly, there has been frustration at a lack of progress with double devolution, working with town and parish councils who want to consider providing more local assets and services.

4.7 Finally, Government has signalled through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill that it will be a requirement for all unitary councils to establish neighbourhood governance. The Bill's intent is to move decision making closer to residents, so that decisions are made by people who best understand their local needs.

4.8 The conversations will be held in clusters of neighbourhoods across the whole of Dorset over the next 12 months. The approach will be participatory and aimed at discovering and producing together opportunities and solutions. Initial

participants will be town and parish councils, ward members, locality employees of Dorset Council, VCS organisations, and health partners, supported and facilitated by a core team from Dorset Council's community partnerships programme.

- 4.9 A test and learn approach is being adopted, recognising that the methods will need to evolve as we learn more about what works best. This includes the detail of which areas are included in clusters, the participants, and the facilitation and hosting of the conversations. The process will start with sharing and exploring information on what the local area is like and will end with follow up sessions to make sense of the findings, and develop draft governance models and double devolution options.
- 4.10 Place and Resources Committee has worked with officers since 24th November 2025, which recommended adoption of the Statement of Reasonable Expectations to Cabinet. This is a partnership agreement between Dorset Council and Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils, aimed at agreeing ways of working more closely to deliver better outcomes for residents. Committee members did not support the recommendation to Cabinet.
- 4.11 .
- 4.12 Having listened to feedback, the Community Conversations were launched through an all-member webinar on 28th January 2026. Members will be asked to use the content to brief their parish and town councils, and to play a key role in the conversations over the next year.
- 4.13 An Executive Advisory Panel is being proposed in consultation with the Leader to support the development of the community conversations.
- 4.14 On 12th February 2026 Place and Resources Overview Committee recommended the Statement of Reasonable Expectations to Cabinet with two minor adjustments..
- 4.15 **Alternative options considered**
 - a) Aiming to deliver on the Communities for All priorities without extensive and genuine community involvement would risk continued duplication, fragmentation and non-sustainable service delivery. This option is therefore not supported.
 - b) Not adopting the Statement of Reasonable Expectations to support closer working with parish and town councils is also rejected as an option. Refusal to sign up to a clear agreement to support closer working would send a signal to town and parish councils that Dorset Council is not serious about working with them, understanding effective community governance, or how we need to adapt and change to be a better partner.

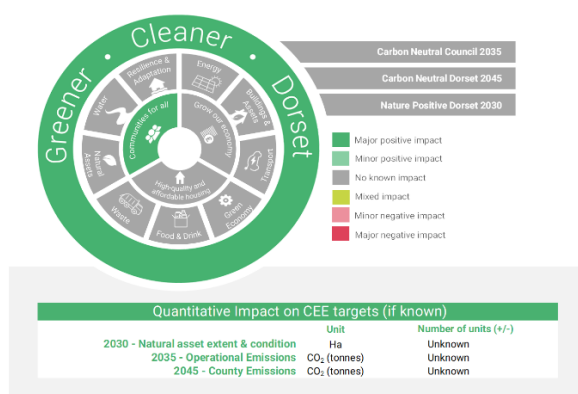
5. Legal considerations

- 5.1 None currently. If the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill passes into law then unitary councils must establish effective neighbourhood governance structures with their communities.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 Community conversations will be supported via £0.5M funding secured through Cabinet for communities transformation in October 2025.

7. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications



8. Well-being and health implications

- 8.1 A strong body of evidence from government evaluations to academic studies shows councils that empower communities and co-produce solutions have better outcomes and even cost savings, across a number of service areas from public health to housing and planning. These improvements happen across health and wellbeing measures, community resilience, public trust and service effectiveness.
- 8.2 Community Conversations build on strong prevention work delivered to date, through a one-council approach. Insights and information gathered through these conversations will be important in helping to shape place-based working across other programmes, including through the Health and Wellbeing Board's strategy, and the Neighbourhood Health Programme being delivered by the NHS and partners in Dorset.
- 8.3 Findings will also inform our future design as a prevention-focused council, building on the excellent work begun by Childrens Services, and Adults and Housing. Conversations will support how we bring together separate initiatives like Thriving Communities, Day Opportunities and Family hubs towards a more joined up service in neighbourhoods.

9. Other implications

- 9.1 Nil.

10. Risk implications

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

Current Risk: MEDIUM

Residual Risk: LOW

11. Equalities

11.1 None.

12. Appendices

12.1 Proposed Statement of Reasonable Expectation

13. Background papers

13.1 English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill briefing

14. Report sign-off

14.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s).