

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 Choose an item.

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, which 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 Place and Resources Overview Committee since November 2025 on the approach to working with communities and the Statement of Reasonable Expectation, a revised version of which is now at Appendix A for approval by 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 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 better 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) to improve connection and collaboration between council directorates;

This report and recommendations 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. First, we cannot deliver the Communities for All priorities without involving communities in identifying needs and solutions together.

4.6 Second, 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, including development of draft governance models and double devolution options.
- 4.10 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.
- 4.11 An Executive Advisory Panel is being proposed in consultation with the Leader to support the development of the community conversations.
- 4.12 On 12th February 2026 Place and Resources Overview Committee recommended the Statement of Reasonable Expectations to cabinet with two minor adjustments. These are included in the Statement provided to cabinet at Appendix A.
- 4.13 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 neighbourhood governance, or how we need to adapt and change to be a better partner.

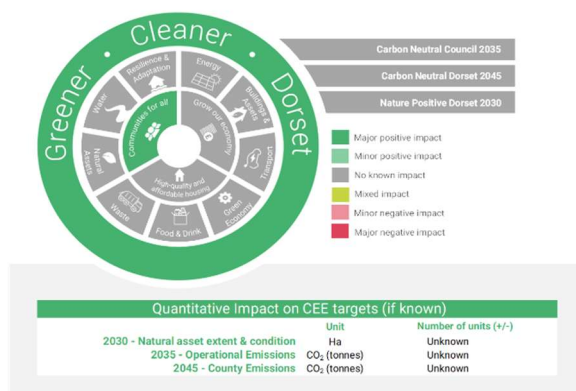
5. Legal considerations

- 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, 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 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).

Appendix A: Statement of Reasonable Expectations

Introduction

This statement sets out the reasonable expectations for partnership working between Parish and Town Councils¹ and Dorset Council.

Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) enters into this agreement in its role representing and supporting its member Parish and Town Councils throughout Dorset.

Both parties support a shared commitment to the communities and residents of Dorset. The statement aims to foster better working relationships, enhance democratic representation, and ensure effective service delivery for the benefit of local communities.

1. Mutual Respect and Recognition

- i. Dorset Council recognises Parish and Town Councils as statutory, democratically elected bodies with legislated roles and responsibilities, the power of taxation and a deep understanding of local issues.
- ii. Parish and Town Councils respect Dorset Council's role as the democratically elected Principal Authority in strategic planning and delivery of a range of statutory services across its area.
- iii. Dorset Council also recognises the role played by DAPTC in representing the collective views and interests of most Town and Parish Councils.
- iv. Both parties commit to a spirit of cooperation, valuing each other's contributions and responsibilities, with a view to ensuring an effective and appropriate response to the differing needs and priorities of local places and communities.

2. Communication and Engagement

- i. Dorset Council and Parish and Town Councils will recognise and foster the importance of a constructive and regular working relationship between the Dorset Council Ward Member and the parish meeting, parish council or town council they liaise with. This relationship should be based on openness, mutual respect and timely communication, supporting the effective flow of local knowledge, community priorities and informed decision making.
- ii. Dorset Council will provide best effort provision of timely and relevant updates on policies, projects, and decisions affecting local communities, and will consult with Parish and Town Councils well before making decisions or policy changes that impact their role and operations or the wellbeing of their place and community.

¹ Parish and Town Councils includes precept raising bodies such as Parish Meetings.

- iii. Parish and Town Councils will share local insights and concerns to inform Dorset Council's decision making by attending regular forums or liaison meetings when established to facilitate open dialogue and exchange of views.
- iv. Clear points of contact will be maintained to ensure smooth communication, by all parties.
- v. Engagement periods will allow sufficient time for meaningful input, and each party undertakes to consider the other's views and insights before making decisions, to seek clarification where necessary, and provide meaningful feedback.

3. Support and Capacity Building

- i. Dorset Council, Parish and Town Councils, and DAPTC will collaborate to identify key areas for guidance and training and determine the most effective methods of delivery. This joint effort will aim to enhance the capabilities of Parish and Town Councils and support the expansion of their role within the local governance framework.
- ii. Resources, toolkits, and best practice examples will be shared between the parties to support effective local governance.
- iii. Parish and Town Councils will proactively seek opportunities to upskill and enhance their role in service delivery in key areas agreed by both parties, community leadership and engagement.
- iv. Parish and Town Councils will develop financial and strategic plans for the short, medium, and longer term to set out their ambitions for the community around them and enhance their role in place management.
- v. Elected members for all parties should be supported and trained to understand the benefits of co-working and partnering toward better outcomes for communities they jointly serve.
- vi. Development of personnel in Parish and Town Councils, particularly those in senior roles like Clerks, will be encouraged to enable them to undertake broader roles and responsibilities effectively.

4. Collaborative Working

- i. Dorset Council, Ward Members and Parish and Town Councils are encouraged to work directly and collaboratively to identify, design and deliver projects that bring mutual benefit to local communities. This includes early engagement on opportunities, transparent sharing of relevant information, and a shared commitment to achieving positive, practical outcomes for residents.
- ii. Dorset Council, Ward Members and Parish and Town Councils will work together to identify, explore, and, where mutually agreed, pursue opportunities for joint initiatives and shared services, and including the transfer or devolution of assets and services.

- iii. Partnership working and a problem-solving approach will be adopted to address challenges collectively and improve local service delivery and community outcomes.
- iv. Dorset Council will work constructively with Parish and Town Councils to facilitate changes through Community Governance Reviews where these strengthen democratic representation.
- v. Greater collaboration between neighbouring Parish and Town Councils will be encouraged to ensure best value asset management and service delivery.

5. Transparency and Accountability

- i. Decisions and actions will be made transparently, with clear explanations provided for major policy changes or service alterations.
- ii. All parties will uphold transparency in their own operations, ensuring local communities are informed and engaged.
- iii. Mechanisms for feedback and review will be in place to assess the effectiveness of collaboration and address any issues constructively.
- iv. This statement will be reviewed jointly on a periodic basis.

Conclusion

This statement represents a shared commitment to strengthening democratic representation and delivering better outcomes for Dorset's communities. By fostering mutual trust, engagement, and cooperation, Parish and Town Councils and Dorset Council can work together effectively to serve the needs of residents.

Signed by

Nick Ireland, Leader of Dorset Council

Date:

KD Johnson, Chair DAPTC Board

Date:

Catherine Howe, Chief Executive Dorset Council

Date:

Neil Wedge, Chief Executive DAPTC

Date:

Background paper: English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

Headlines from the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

- The Bill **establishes the ‘Strategic Authority’ tier of authority in England**. There will be three levels of Strategic Authorities including: Foundation Strategic Authorities, Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities
- The Bill introduces a **new duty for all local authorities to create ‘effective neighbourhood governance’ structures**.
- The Bill also introduces a **new community right to buy** this means:
 - Communities are given the first opportunity to purchase local assets when they are put up for sale, with an extended 12-month period to raise funding and a new ‘Sporting’ category for sports grounds and facilities.
- The Bill also includes the **removal of upwards only rent reviews in commercial leases**.
- The government hopes this will boost local high streets and promote economic growth.
- The Bill announces **additional rights for Mayors** [more detail below] including:
 - New licensing powers
 - Requirement for **mayors to prepare a proposed designation of a key route network**.
 - Mayors would be **able to intervene in planning decisions if they are deemed of “potential strategic importance”**.
- Allow mayors to **charge a community infrastructure levy**, a charge on new development in the area to fund infrastructure.
- New powers to **institute Mayoral Development Orders and a process to establish Mayoral Development Corporations**.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill was introduced on 10 July. The Bill is available to read [here](#). The Bill follows the English Devolution White Paper, which was published December 2024. Measures fall under 3 broad sections:

- **Devolution** - describes devolution structures, outlines the expansion of powers for Mayors and Strategic and Combined Authorities through the new Devolution Framework and details routes to devolution.
- **Local government** – outlines changes to local authority governance, reforming accountability and introducing neighbourhood governance structures.
- **Communities** – details changes to local communities' ability to purchase assets through a new Community Right to Buy and reforms to commercial leases.

Summary of key points

New tier of Strategic Authorities and Devolution Framework

- The Bill **establishes the ‘Strategic Authority’ tier of authority in England**. There will be three levels of Strategic Authorities including:
 - Foundation Strategic Authorities
 - Mayoral Strategic Authorities
 - Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities

- The Bill details seven areas of competence which Strategic Authorities will have which are as follows:
 - Transport and local infrastructure
 - Skills and employment support
 - Housing and strategic planning
 - Economic development and regeneration
 - Environment and net zero
 - Health, wellbeing and public service reform
 - Public safety
- The Bill also establishes a devolution framework in statute.
 - This will mean consistent powers, functions and duties that automatically apply to future Strategic Authorities.

Powers and changes to local communities

- There will be a new requirement for local authorities to put in place ‘effective neighbourhood governance’. Whilst the Bill and the notes do not set out what these are likely to involve it does state that:
 - The secretary of state will have the power to “define a neighbourhood area and specify the parameters of what arrangements will be appropriate to meet this duty”.
- A new Community Right to Buy has been introduced which will mean:
 - Communities are given the first opportunity to purchase local assets when they are put up for sale. Communities will also be given an extended 12-month period to raise funding.
 - The introduction of a new ‘Sporting’ category protection of local assets for sports grounds and facilities.
- The Bill will also ban Upward Only Rent Reviews (UORR) clauses in commercial leases.
 - The change will not affect existing contracts but will ban the introduction of upward-only clauses in new agreements. Landlords will need to choose between agreeing fixed rents or introducing a review clause that allows rents to fall as well as go up.
 - The government hopes this will ‘help small businesses, assist local economies and job opportunities and help reduce vacant high streets’.
- The Bill reiterates the government's commitment to the establishment of the Local Audit Office, which was announced following a consultation earlier this year, with provisions in the Bill.

New rights and powers for Mayors and Strategic Authorities

- The Bill announces additional rights for Mayors including:
 - Licensing powers such as for rental e-bikes for Strategic Authorities.
 - A clause which requires mayors to prepare a proposed designation of a key route network that are considered some of the “most important local roads in an

area”, they can then “direct constituent highways authorities” in the use of their powers.

- Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities, where they exist, will be the sole transport authority for their area.
- Mayors would also be able to intervene in planning decisions if they are deemed of “potential strategic importance”.
- The Bill would also allow mayors to charge a community infrastructure levy, a charge on new development in the area to fund infrastructure.
- New powers to institute Mayoral Development Orders and a process to establish Mayoral Development Corporations.
- Currently, the remit of a mayoral development corporation is to secure the regeneration of its area. Measures in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill seek to expand this to include development, so mayoral development corporations can deliver new settlements, including on greenfield sites, in addition to urban regeneration.
- The supplementary vote system will also be reintroduced in the election of mayors and police and crime commissioners.
- The Bill require Mayoral Strategic Authorities, except the GLA, to produce and publish a local growth plan.
- The Bill clarifies that a police area does not need a PCC if those functions have been transferred to a mayor under new powers in the 2009 or 2023 Acts.
 - The Bill introduces a new section (76A) and Schedule 10A into the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 to set out provisions for such transfers. It also allows the Secretary of State to alter police areas to facilitate these transfers and specify when they take effect.
- The Bill includes a clause which makes provision requiring the Secretary of State to respond to proposals from mayors of established mayoral strategic authorities for further powers that would help them deliver against their areas of competence.