

Cabinet

19 May 2025

Modern, Sustainable Unitary – reimagining the role of Dorset Council

For Decision

Cabinet Member:

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

Local Councillor(s): All

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1. Executive summary

Dorset Council is operating in a period of significant change. Demand for services is increasing, resources remain constrained, and public trust in institutions is under pressure. At the same time, social, technological and policy change is moving quickly. Local government was designed for a different era, and continuing to work in the same way will not be enough to meet residents' expectations or to sustain services over the longer term. Beyond that, not changing the way we work risks missing out on the opportunities that these changes present to make sure that Dorset Council, and the communities we serve, are best placed to thrive into the future. The council's administration has outlined an ambitious council plan which needs an effective and future focused organisation to deliver that ambition.

The current three-year government funding settlement provides a short period of relative financial stability. This creates a limited but important opportunity to look ahead and make the larger changes needed to put the council on a more sustainable footing. This work is about ensuring the council can continue to provide long-term stewardship for people and place. Many councils throughout England are now undergoing local government re-organisation (LGR) as the government looks to redefine the geography of local democratic institutions. Dorset Council became a unitary authority in 2019. While unitarisation has delivered many benefits, the full

potential of being a single organisation has not yet been realised. Nationally, there has been little discussion about what reform should look like specifically for unitary councils. Dorset has an opportunity to lead by example by setting out a clear and practical model that delivers good-value, future-proof services for residents.

To do this, the council needs greater clarity about how it works, how decisions are made, and how activity is aligned across services and with partners. The vision of becoming **a modern, sustainable unitary council** provides this shared direction. It sets out the council's purpose, the outcomes it is working towards, and the principles that guide decisions and use of resources, in support of democratically agreed priorities. Representative democracy is central to the council's purpose. As the council changes how it works, it is essential that the role of elected members as decision makers and community leaders is strengthened. The aim is to ensure that political priorities are translated clearly and consistently into delivery, investment decisions and ways of working, while maintaining democratic accountability.

Four foundational elements underpin this journey:

1. working with communities
2. prevention
3. modernisation
4. the skills and agency of the workforce

While some councils have focused on one or two of these areas (see appendix 1 for case studies), no authority has yet brought all four together within a single, coherent vision. This paper sets out the case for doing so and explains the organisational, workforce and partnership changes needed to support the council's priorities and ensure it remains responsive in a changing environment.

2. **Recommendation(s)**

2.1 Cabinet is asked to endorse the vision and principles of a modern, sustainable unitary council, and the overall journey required to achieve this.

Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 To ensure members understand the proposed direction, how it supports delivery of council priorities, and how it aligns with existing change programmes.

3.2 To ensure members are sighted on how this organisational journey will develop over time, with appropriate links to democratic processes built in.

4. **The report**

Local councils and increasingly strategic authorities, derive authority through their democratic mandate. Through elections and formal decision-making, residents set

the priorities that councils pursue during a term of office. This remains one of the foundational strengths of local government and a core source of legitimacy.

However, the context in which this mandate is exercised has changed. Councils face sustained financial pressure, rising and more complex demand, and higher expectations about responsiveness and outcomes. At the same time, many residents feel that decision-making does not always lead to visible improvements in their day-to-day experience. Public trust in institutions is under strain. These pressures are not the result of any single policy or organisational failure. They reflect deeper structural and societal shifts that challenge traditional service-led and siloed models of delivery. In this context, the risk is not a lack of democratic intent, but **fragmentation**: well-intentioned decisions pulling in different directions, short-term fixes crowding out long-term prevention, and organisational complexity obscuring accountability and impact.

The vision of a modern, sustainable unitary responds to this challenge by providing **clear operational direction without constraining democratic choice**. It does not set strategic priorities - those remain the role of elected members. Instead, it establishes a shared understanding of:

1. the purpose the organisation
2. the outcomes it is working to achieve
3. the principles that guide decisions and use of resources

This helps ensure that democratically agreed priorities (especially in the council plan) are delivered coherently and consistently, regardless of service boundary, funding source or organisational structure.

Crucially, the vision is a **direction, not a destination**. While the shift is expected to take place over the next two to three years, the vision does not prescribe specific policies or limit future administrations. It provides a stable framework within which different political priorities can be pursued effectively and sustainably.

It makes decision-making clearer, aligns officer activity with member intent, supports partnership working around shared outcomes, and provides a common reference point for explaining change to employees, partners and communities.

Organisational vision

A modern, sustainable unitary council can be described through three linked ideas:

- **Modern**: being modern is about more than technology. It means using up-to-date ways of working, reducing unnecessary complexity, and bringing together people with different skills to focus on shared outcomes. This includes more flexible and collaborative working across teams and ensuring that professional practice reflects the world we operate in today. This work is overseen through the council's transformation portfolio and as articulated in

April cabinet, the continued development of this portfolio depends on a shared vision for what it means to operate as a modern, sustainable, unitary council.

- **Sustainable:** sustainability includes financial stability but goes further than this. It means having the capacity, skills and resilience to respond to future pressures and unexpected events. This will be reflected as we develop our Medium-Term Financial Plan. It also means supporting a healthy workforce and playing a full role in the long-term sustainability of Dorset's communities, including addressing the climate and nature emergency as part of everyday decision-making.
- **Unitary:** as a unitary authority, the council must act as a single organisation rather than a collection of separate services. Working in this way allows the council to make better use of resources, reduce duplication and work more effectively with communities and partners. This principle runs through all aspects of the vision.

Together, these elements support a council that works to shared values, makes evidence-based decisions and adapts as circumstances change. This is not about a single programme or project, but about how the organisation operates day to day.

Local government can and should be at the heart of the changes required to drive public service reform. It does not require permission from central government or other partners, and how we create a new vision for our organisation, new ways of working with our partners and communities will be critical if we are to become a council that is seen as a key partner in the delivery of outcomes that matter to our communities.

In doing so, it shifts the organisation from managing pressure in isolation to intentionally shaping a system that is better able to deliver the outcomes that matter most to Dorset's communities, now and in the future.

Foundational elements

The vision is supported by four key areas of work:

1. **Working with communities:** deepening place ~~OB~~based working so decisions are shaped closer to the people they affect, and we work effectively in partnership with our communities (as outlined in the March 3 Cabinet paper, 'Working with communities').
2. **Prevention:** taking a whole ~~OB~~council approach to preventing problems early, rather than responding late and at higher cost.
3. **Modernisation:** continuing the work of Our Future Council transformation to update systems, processes and ways of working so the organisation operates efficiently and consistently.

4. **Our workforce:** developing the skills, confidence, productivity and capacity of employees, and ensuring Dorset Council is an employer of choice.

Becoming a modern, sustainable unitary creates the conditions for more deliberate, evidence-led and participatory change. Without this shift, financial sustainability would increasingly rely on reducing services in reactive ways. Instead, the vision supports a move towards earlier intervention, better use of resources and stronger outcomes for residents.

Engagement

The vision has been shaped by engagement with employees, members and partners, as well as by the council's democratic role within the wider system.

Since August 2025, the council has held a series of engagement activities with employees, including 'Conversations with Catherine', leadership events and an online feedback form. These sessions focused on experiences of working at Dorset Council and views on the proposed vision.

Around 300 employees attended in-person sessions, contributing approximately 1,400 comments and questions. A further 100 colleagues shared feedback through the online form.

Key themes included:

- To work better together to remove siloed ways of working and join up approaches.
- To share a clear organisational vision for change, enabling more meaningful engagement.
- To bring consistency and alignment of approaches across services to remove duplication.
- To clearly communicate roles, responsibilities and decisions.
- To ensure clear development opportunities and career pathways for employees.
- To make better use of our data to support faster, better-informed decisions.

Overall, engagement showed strong commitment to the council's purpose alongside frustration with workload, complexity and lack of clarity. While there was plenty of positive feedback, there was broad support for the vision of a modern, sustainable unitary, particularly around clearer leadership, simpler processes, better workforce support and improved collaboration. This colleague participation will continue as we move towards the vision.

Throughout 2025, we also engaged with the voluntary and community sector, as well as town and parish councils, with support from Volunteer Centre Dorset and the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC). The wide-ranging feedback indicated that, while Dorset Council is generally seen as a valued partner, but at times it can be challenging to work with.

As a large and complex organisation, Dorset Council can be difficult to navigate and connect with, which has led some organisations to feel that we do not always understand the needs of local communities or work with our community partners in the most effective ways. We want to address this by strengthening our understanding of our communities and improving how we work in partnership. This will be explored through the programme of community conversations in 2026, which will help to design new, more effective and joined-up ways of working with communities.

Member engagement on the journey towards becoming a modern, sustainable council through webinars and ongoing updates will form a key part of the process moving forwards. It is also imperative that this organisational journey is understood by all members as it develops, with appropriate interfaces with democratic processes embedded into the process.

Customer experience and insight

Engagement has been complemented by evidence from customer insight. Residents experience the council as a single organisation, but not always as a joined-up one. While staff are valued, customers can face fragmented journeys, multiple points of contact and the need to repeat information.

The council's transformation work aims to improve this experience by simplifying access to services, joining up systems and designing around customer journeys rather than organisational boundaries. Early progress includes the new customer hub, clearer digital information and better use of insight to reduce avoidable contact and improve consistency.

What the journey could look like in practice

Much of the work needed to become a modern, sustainable unitary is already underway through existing transformation, modernisation and workforce programmes agreed by Cabinet. This paper provides the framework that connects this work into a single, clear direction.

Recent changes to the Senior Leadership Team structure are intended to support more collaborative working across services and a stronger focus on shared outcomes. Further work on governance and operational arrangements will help ensure priorities are delivered clearly and effectively.

The next phase is not just about starting new initiatives, but about making existing work more visible, connected and measurable, aligned to the council's long-term role and financial position. The following section highlights areas of work that are already underway or in development that will be integral to the delivery of the vision.

Key programmes of work and indicative milestones

Community conversations and place-based working (2025–2029)

Work is already underway to strengthen how the council engages with communities.

A structured programme of community conversations will be delivered during 2026 to support stronger place-based working and local decision-making. This approach will bring together councillors, town and parish councils, voluntary groups and partners to explore local needs, test approaches and shape future neighbourhood governance. Insights from these conversations will inform policy, governance and budget decisions from 2027 onwards. The approach is intended to become a repeatable way of working rather than a one-off exercise.

Importantly, the process of community conversations aims to build trust between Dorset Council and local partners, create a space for genuine co-design and further empower local leadership to build community resilience.

Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and digital transformation (2025–2029)

Implementation of new core HR, payroll and finance systems, alongside wider digital investment, will provide more consistent processes, better data and as a result stronger decision-making, supporting the council's long-term sustainability.

Strengthening decision making and internal governance (2025 – 2029)

As we work to design a less siloed and more integrated organisation it is essential that our governance and decision making reflects this ambition. To underpin this a review of internal governance has been carried out and is now being implemented. This establishes stronger, more crosscutting decision-making that supports effective prioritisation and delivery of council priorities.

By strengthening internal governance, proposals and recommendations are developed and tested through forums that consider the council as a single system and are grounded in our shared vision for a modern, sustainable unitary. This approach improves the quality, coherence and impact of work as it progresses from internal development to formal democratic governance structures led by elected Members.

The next phase of work will consider the landscape of partnership boards and how the council engages within these spaces to best reflect council priorities and new ways of working.

Service planning in the change 2026-2029

More stable funding enables a move to multi-year service planning. This will allow services to plan for the future, align workforce development and support a coherent approach to change, with regular review and oversight.

By 2029, this approach will support the delivery of council plan priorities alongside the realisation of the council's ambition to operate as a modern, sustainable unitary authority, with multiyear service plans acting as an anchor to maintain focus and coherence across the transformation journey.

Beacon teams and test-and-learn delivery (2025–2026)

New ways of working, and new technology, are already being tested through the new customer hub, business support and digital delivery. During 2026, learning from the beacon teams will be scaled and applied more widely, embedding the 'test-and-learn' approach as a normal part of service improvement.

People and workforce (2025–2027)

Leadership redesign and matrix working are already underway, providing the structural foundations for change. The next phase focuses on redesigning the council's approach to strategic workforce planning, alongside targeted change support, to ensure the organisation has a clear, sustainable plan for developing the skills, capability and capacity required to deliver a modern, sustainable unitary council. During 2025–26 this work will strengthen workforce design, development and cultural change, with new ways of working embedded and sustained by 2027.

Many of the complex challenges that we wish to tackle through the leadership redesign and council plan delivery will also require employees to have skills and capabilities to work effectively in complex systems – with communities, statutory and voluntary sector partners. Learning and Development needs will need to consider how we effectively support these skillsets and capabilities, including convening, navigating and problem-solving complexity, from a human-centric point of view.

We will also make it easier for employees to participate in open conversations by using clear, trusted ways to listen and respond. This means using different mechanisms to create the conditions and environment for two-way conversations, building participation skills for both internal and external engagement.

Prevention as a shared principle

Prevention runs across all areas of the vision. The creation of a new Executive Director post to focus on this agenda reinforces its importance.

Earlier engagement with communities, redesigned services, better use of data and a more skilled workforce will help the council address issues earlier and more effectively.

This shift requires cultural change, breaking down organisational boundaries and working more closely with partners. Together, these changes support better outcomes for residents and long-term sustainability for the organisation.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 No change was also considered, but this would not deliver on the vision required to support the transition required to become a modern, sustainable unitary.

6. Legal considerations

6.1 The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act introduced a new duty for all local authorities to create 'effective neighbourhood governance' structures. The aim is to support decision making closer to communities. Dorset Council's ambitions to work more closely with its communities, including the Community Conversations approach set out in this paper, provides a platform to explore and develop neighbourhood governance models alongside communities, Parish and Town Councils, Ward Councillors and local stakeholders. This will be a crucial step in fulfilling this legal duty, as well as becoming a modern, sustainable unitary council.

7. Financial implications

7.1 The vision of becoming a modern, sustainable unitary council is fundamentally rooted in the need to rebalance how the council deploys its resources — continuing to move away from managing escalation and failure demand, and towards anticipating need earlier and intervening more effectively at lower cost. The benefits of this are already seen in the council's MTFP effective early intervention work has meant that Dorset hasn't faced the volatility experienced by some councils across its social care responsibilities.

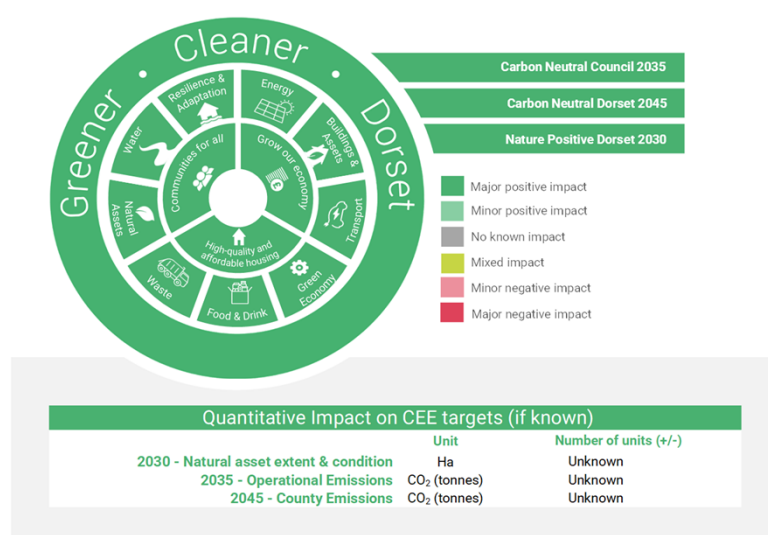
7.2 This shift is essential to long-term financial sustainability, as reliance on high cost, late-stage interventions is not affordable within the medium to long-term financial outlook facing local government.

7.3 Sustainability in this context extends beyond the requirement to set balanced budgets. This depends on having the organisational capacity and financial resilience to make deliberate choices: investing earlier to prevent escalation; simplifying structures and processes that drive duplication and cost; stopping or redesigning activity that no longer adds value; and prioritising resources towards outcomes that reduce long-term demand. A stronger "one council" approach – supported by better data, clear accountability and integrated financial, workforce and system planning - is intended to support this by enabling earlier identification of need, better targeting of support, and more coordinated use of existing resources across service boundaries.

7.4 Delivering this shift will need to be underpinned by strong financial and operational foundations, including consistent processes, robust management

information and integrated financial, workforce and service data. Modern enabling systems (e.g. **a new HR, Payroll and Finance System (ERP)**) are a key component of this, supporting improved forecasting and scenario modelling to help allocate resources and develop stronger evidence base for preventative and anticipatory decision-making.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications



8.1

At the heart of the vision of a modern, sustainable unitary is a commitment to embed the climate and nature work into our DNA, framing all that we do to work towards the principle of becoming an environmentally responsible employer. The climate and nature operational group working with strengthened strategic leadership will ensure that all aspects of council operations are considered as part of this journey.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 One of the key focus areas of a modern, sustainable unitary is on prevention. While prevention is complex, at its heart is the principle that through more sophisticated, targeted and join-up approaches, it should be possible to reduce demand over time for health and well-being related issues.

9.2 In response to concerns raised during colleague engagement pertaining to workload, the journey towards becoming a modern, sustainable unitary will embed greater automation and demand management allowing employees to focus on tasks that have more intrinsic value and are human-centred.

9.3 We also need to think carefully about the work that we do and where appropriate stop doing things which are no longer relevant or have value. Like barnacles on a boat, an organisation can pick up activities that need reviewing and releasing and doing this carefully is important for creating capacity for staff.

10. Other implications

N/A

11. Risk implications

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

Current Risk: High: There is a risk that the benefits of organisational modernisation are not fully realised if cultural and structural change is not aligned with transformation of the council's core systems.

Residual Risk: Medium: The ERP programme mitigates this risk by providing a consistent operational and data foundation aligned to the principles of a modern, sustainable unitary council.

Current risk: Medium: There is a risk that employees will not engage with or fully understand the principles of a modern, sustainable unitary, hampering the cultural changes required.

Residual risk: Low: ongoing staff participation, structural changes and future workforce design will all form part of the ongoing commitment to ensure that employees are informed and have the right working environment and tools to adapt and embrace new ways of working.

12. Equalities

12.1 As this paper outlines a vision, it is considered that an EqIA is not required at this stage. As proposals develop, an EqIA will be undertaken to consider the impact of establishing a modern, sustainable unitary council on the workforce and customers.

As part of activity to realise the vision of becoming a modern, sustainable unitary council, and on the direction of the Chief Executive, work is underway to accelerate three aspects of our Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy and action plan:

1. **Love our spaces** - workplace accessibility and inclusion, leading on to looking at hybrid working arrangements.
2. **Community cohesion** - building a shared sense of belonging, mutual respect, and positive relationships among people from different backgrounds, both internally and externally.
3. **Living our values** - focussing on how our values are experienced day to day by colleagues – in how we treat one another, how we lead, how decisions are made, and how it feels to work together across Dorset Council.

Progress is reported to the EDI Strategic Board on a bi-monthly basis.

13. Appendices

13.1 Case studies from other public organisations of the four foundational elements (to follow)

14. Background paper

14.1 N/A

15. Report sign-off

15.1 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 1: Case studies from other public organisations of the four foundational elements

Shared approaches to prevention

The Preston Model: Economic Prevention through Community Wealth Building

Preston City Council pioneered Community Wealth Building (CWB) as a form of economic prevention. By using the spending power of anchor institutions (like the university, police, and local government), the council aimed to prevent the 'leakage of wealth' from the local economy.

Since 2013, the Preston Model has re-routed millions of pounds back into the local economy, providing a buffer against the deindustrialisation and austerity that had previously crippled the city.

A 2023 study in *The Lancet* and a 2025 follow-up in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) confirmed that CWB in Preston directly correlated with improvements in mental health and life satisfaction.

The BMJ study specifically noted a 4% growth in employment compared to similar cities, with the most significant benefits felt by ethnic minority groups, men, and those with disabilities. This demonstrates that economic prevention and building a resilient local economy has direct clinical impacts on the population.

Impact

- Wealth Re-routing: £70 million of anchor institution spending re-routed back to Preston since 2013.
- Regional Investment: £200 million additionally invested across the Lancashire economy.
- Job Creation: 4,500 new jobs created through local supply chain development.
- Unemployment Rate: Reduced from 6.5% in 2014 to 3.1% in 2017 (well below the UK average).
- Poverty Reduction: Lifted the city out of the bottom 20% of the UK's most deprived local authorities.

Learn more

- [New study confirms CWB benefits](#)

- [Community](#) [Wealth](#) [Building:](#) [Preston](#)

The Role of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs)

Integrated Care Systems, formalised in 2022, represent a shift from competition to collaboration between the NHS, local government, and the voluntary sector.

Most ICSs have now prioritised prevention at a strategic level, recognising that by 2040, an additional 2.5 million people in England will be living with a major illness.

Successful ICS models use 'split-screen thinking' to maintain a focus on both tactical short-term needs and strategic long-term preventative goals.

By utilising high-quality, joined-up data, these systems can identify high-impact cohorts—individuals who are driving current and future demand—and intervene early.

Early preventative interventions are estimated to achieve a 33% reduction in ill health and could unlock a £320 billion rise in GDP over 20 years by keeping people in the workforce for longer.

Impact

- North of Tyne CA used its devolution deal to join up prevention measures and map system activity
- Growing Health Together in E Surrey integrates prevention into neighbourhood teams, collaborating with PCNs and communities
- West Yorkshire ICB emphasises routine conversations with communities to understand the root causes of distress
- Nottingham and Nottinghamshire established clear guiding principles for embedding prevention across all system levels

Learn more

- [Unlocking prevention in integrated care systems | NHS Confederation](#)
- [Unlocking prevention in integrated care systems: A guide to balancing short- and longer-term impact](#)

Co-designing with communities

The Barking and Dagenham Ecosystem: Every One Every Day

Barking and Dagenham Council pioneered an ambitious co-design experiment through the 'Every one Every Day' project (2017–2023).

This initiative built a practical participation system designed to make everyday activities such as cooking, gardening, and making the foundation for social cohesion and economic resilience.

The project was structured around a network of neighbourhood shops that acted as incubators for resident ideas. Unlike traditional funding models that require complex business cases, this ecosystem provided residents with tools, space, and technical support to test their ideas.

The council's role was that of an enabler rather than a provider. By providing Everyone's Warehouse, a 3,300m² makerspace, the council gave residents the means of production to solve their own challenges.

A notable insight is that 98% of the opportunities were designed to be child-friendly, ensuring that caregivers (disproportionately women) were not excluded from the co-design process. While the formal foundation closed in 2024, the legacy continues through rehomed equipment and resident-led groups that outlast the initial funding.

Impact

- Resident Reach: Nearly 10,000 local residents involved in initiatives
- Project Creation: Over 300 new projects, learning programmes, and collaborative businesses created
- Social Cohesion: 34,000 hours spent together by neighbours; trust in neighbours scored 8/10
- Economic Development: 450 residents joined collaborative business programmes; social enterprises in catering, food, and textiles emerged

Learn more

- [The Project Story — Every One Every Day](#)
- [Every One Every Day | Relationships Project](#)
- [Community participation: Every One Every Day](#)

Modern ways of working, agency and skills to lead change

Government Digital Service (GDS / gov.uk)

The United Kingdom's Government Digital Service (GDS) provides a useful example of how agile methodologies can be institutionalised at a national scale.

Since its inception in 2011, GDS has moved through three distinct phases:

1. the creation of a new digital paradigm
2. the professionalisation of digital skills
3. the eventual absorption of these capabilities into the wider civil service

Before the GDS, government IT was dominated by massive, multi-year contracts that often resulted in services that were obsolete by the time they launched.

GDS introduced the "Digital by Default" standard, which mandated that services be designed around user needs through an iterative process of Discovery, Alpha, Beta, and Live phases.

One of the most critical insights from the GDS experience is that agile transformation is not merely a technical change but a leadership challenge. True agile leadership at all levels is required to drive business agility, the ability of the entire organisation to respond to external shifts.

Impact

- Risk Profile: Low with risks addressed early through prototyping
- User Feedback: Continuous and integrated into every sprint
- Funding Structure: Incremental funding tied to progress and outcomes
- Core Values: Responding to change and delivering user value
- Organisational Role: Cross-functional teams and dynamic capabilities

Learn more

- [Government Transformation Strategy - GOV.UK](#)
- [Dynamic capabilities in the public sector: The case of the UK's Government Digital Service](#)

Essex County Council: Essex Digital Service (EDS)

In November 2025, Essex County Council merged its Technology Services and Service Transformation teams to create the Essex Digital Service (EDS). The EDS is

designed to be a unified force for change, combining technical expertise with digital innovation to solve problems faster.

Implementation of the EDS followed a set of modern digital principles, including service standards and repeatable patterns and digital as a 'team sport'.

The team adopted a multidisciplinary approach, using agile, iterative methods to create services designed around user needs. By securing technological foundations such as modern data ingestion pipelines and automated patching, the council has built a scalable operating model that moves away from piecemeal, transactional digital initiatives.

The EDS also prioritised building in-house capability, using training and upskilling alongside the delivery of outcomes. This included a Centre of Excellence model to support Citizen Developers within the council.

By making all new source code open and reusable, the EDS is ensuring that digital transformation is sustainable and cost-effective, reducing the coordination overhead that historically hampered progress in the local government system.

Impact

- Merging teams allowed for faster problem-solving and reduced the duplication of digital efforts across the council
- The WCT strategy, enabled by EDS, is on track to realise significant savings through the exploitation of AI and data-driven targeting of core services
- Adopting the GDS (Government Digital Service) standards ensured that new digital experiences were simple, accessible, and intuitive for residents

Learn more

- [EDS - building a modern digital future for Essex](#)
- [ECC whole council transformation summary](#)

Social Innovation

Greater Essex - The Essex Caring Commission

Essex County Council is currently undertaking a fundamental reconfiguration of its public services to create what it terms a "preventative state". The driving force

behind this transformation is the realisation that rising demand for acute health and social care is outstripping available funding, necessitating a "Prevention First" approach that tackles the wider determinants of health—such as housing, transport, and work—at their source.

The 2024-2025 reports from the Essex Caring Communities Commission outline twenty-three actions designed to inspire local leadership and transform services. A central feature of this modernisation is the proposed "Caring Essex: Residents Assembly," which allows a representative cross-section of the public to shape the shift toward prevention and weigh the trade-offs involved in radical service redesign. The impact of social innovation in Essex is measured through the Essex Innovation network, which has seen significant growth.

These results illustrate how modernisation can be achieved by "building capability and competence into communities". By investing in social capital and community-owned infrastructure—such as the e-bike hubs in Uttlesford or the creative collaborations that engage over 3,200 residents—Essex is creating a network of support that reduces the long-term burden on the local authority's core budgets.

Impact

- Community Innovation Labs: 32 active projects; 8,500+ people reached
- Sustainability Projects: 25 green projects; 2,800 tonnes of CO2 saved
- Community Investment: £850,000+ channelled to grassroots innovation
- Lives Impacted: 15,000+ residents directly benefiting from projects
- Flood Defence (Southend): £2.1M flood damage prevented; 500+ homes protected
- Rural Connectivity: 12 villages connected via e-bike hubs; 85% carbon reduction

Learn more

[Essex Caring Communities Report](#)