Place and Resources Overview committee
19 November 2026
Working with communities
For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:
Cllr M Bell, Public Health, Prevention & Communities

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:
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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. Executive summary

1.1 This report updates members on the programme of work to redesign how the council works with communities and to strengthen our place-based working across Dorset. Since July 2026, Community Conversations have been undertaken across 14 geographic clusters with organisations and individuals that represent and work within those communities, including town and parish councils, voluntary and community organisations, health partners, ward councillors and other local stakeholders.

1.2 The Community Conversations programme is informing the development of a more locally responsive approach to working with communities. The intended outcomes are to:

- enable decisions to be taken as locally as possible, with communities having greater influence over the issues that matter to them
- improve outcomes for residents through a stronger understanding of local needs and more joined-up services, support and partnerships
- strengthen the resilience and sustainability of both Dorset Council and local communities by supporting prevention, building community capacity and reducing demand on statutory services over time.

1.3 The conversations have explored how decision-making, services and partnerships can be shaped more effectively around local places. Consideration has

been given to the principle of ‘double devolution’: this is the transfer of powers, services, assets or decision-making from a principal local authority (i.e. Dorset Council) to town and parish councils or community organisations, so decisions are made closer to local people.

Alongside this external engagement, the council has also undertaken internal analysis of the provision of its own locality services, community hubs, use of local data, and leadership arrangements to better understand the effectiveness of current arrangements for working with communities.

1.4 This report outlines the next phase of development: local pilots to develop and test neighbourhood governance models and opportunities for double devolution. It summarises the main themes emerging from the Community Conversations and the internal work that will inform this next phase.

1.5 This work supports delivery of the Council Plan priority of "Communities for All", including commitments on neighbourhood governance, double devolution, prevention and partnership working.

1.6 National policy is increasingly focused on devolving decision-making and strengthening neighbourhood governance. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 places new expectations on councils to establish effective neighbourhood governance arrangements. The council is also preparing for further reforms anticipated through the Government's forthcoming Rewiring the State White Paper, which is expected to promote greater devolution, stronger place-based leadership and increased local accountability.

2. Recommendation(s)

At this stage, members are being asked to review emerging findings and provide feedback, rather than approve a final model for neighbourhood governance or double devolution. Proposals will return to Place and Resources Overview in March 2027 and to Cabinet in May 2027.

2.1 Members of Place and Resources Overview committee are asked to:

a) review the findings emerging from the Community Conversations programme and related work;

b) consider the implications for how Dorset Council works with communities and partners in future, particularly the balance between local flexibility and a coordinated council approach, the support partners need to take on greater responsibility, and clearer routes for local influence; and

c) provide feedback to inform the next phase of development and implementation, following which proposals will be brought back to Place and Resources Overview in March 2027 and to Cabinet in May 2027.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 In March 2026, Cabinet agreed that members would receive regular progress reports on the development of neighbourhood governance and community-led working arrangements. Reporting would be through an Executive Advisory Panel, established for this purpose, and through Place and Resources Overview Committee.

3.2 The Community Conversations and internal work have surfaced clear opportunities for new ways of working with communities which we now need to act on, developing options through co-production with partners and a ‘test and learn’ approach.

4. Community Conversations

4.1 Community Conversations are a programme of structured discussions taking place across 14 geographic clusters covering the Dorset Council area between July and December 2026.

4.2 The conversations bring together town and parish councils, voluntary and community organisations, health and other partners, community leaders, Dorset Council ward members and council officers to explore how local services, decision-making and partnerships can better reflect the needs of individual places.

At the time of publication of this report, we have held all 14 round one conversations, and 6 of the 14 round two conversations across the clusters (see Appendix A). The first round of conversations has been attended by approximately 618 individuals and 364 organisations.

4.3 The conversations are intended to inform:

- future neighbourhood governance arrangements
- opportunities for double devolution
- stronger partnership working across local communities
- Dorset Council's development of a more integrated, locality-based approach to service delivery.

4.4 Two Community Conversations sessions are held within each cluster. The first explores local strengths, challenges and priorities. The second focuses on opportunities, ideas and future ways of working.

4.5 An Executive Advisory Panel with cross-party representation has supported and overseen the programme throughout its development.

4.6 What we have heard from community partners through the Community Conversations:

These themes are an interim assessment of the conversations held so far, not the final analysis of all 14 clusters. They describe the views expressed by participants and do not, on their own, establish how widely those views are shared across Dorset's communities. The themes will be reviewed alongside the remaining conversations when the programme concludes in early December 2026.

1. **Strong appetite for collaboration**
   Local partners, including town and parish councils, community and voluntary organisations, elected members, health partners and other stakeholders, have expressed a strong desire to work together to address local challenges and opportunities. Participants consistently highlighted the value of combining the strengths, expertise and resources of different organisations around shared local priorities.

   There is recognition that in some circumstances local partners may be better placed than Dorset Council to lead delivery, drawing on their local knowledge, relationships and community presence. This points towards a future role for Dorset Council that places greater emphasis on convening, enabling and supporting local action, while recognising, valuing and investing in the expertise that exists within communities. Effective partnership working will require relationships based on mutual trust, shared responsibility and a willingness to let leadership sit with the organisations best placed to achieve outcomes.

2. **Local flexibility is essential**
   There is strong support for local decision-making, but partners consistently emphasise that different communities require different solutions and levels of support, which should be established through use of local data, insight and listening to local voices.

3. **Partnership alongside devolution**
   Partners are interested in taking on greater responsibility where appropriate, but emphasise that successful devolution of assets, services or decision-making must be supported by capacity-building, funding and ongoing professional support. Organisations want to be treated as equal partners by Dorset Council (with parity of esteem, “working with, not doing to”), and would like to adopt a positive, proactive, strengths-based approach to working together.

4. **Better access and influence**
   Partners want clearer routes into decision-making and more evidence that local insight influences outcomes. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of stronger feedback loops, so that communities can understand how their views have been considered, what decisions have been taken and what action has resulted. Future arrangements should

therefore support both greater local influence and clearer communication about how community feedback has informed decision-making and service delivery.

5. **Strong support for place-based working**
   There is strong support for organising services and partnerships around communities rather than organisational boundaries, with greater integration between public services, voluntary organisations and local councils. There are strong calls for simpler ways to engage with Dorset Council through trusted local contacts and better two-way communication. Greater clarity is needed around the roles of different local partners and how we can best work together.

6. **Willingness to test and learn**
   Participants are open to piloting different approaches and helping shape future models through practical experimentation and learning.

4.7 What we have learnt about Dorset Council

4.7.1 Service mapping findings

Work has been undertaken to map out and analyse all the points at which Dorset Council services interact with local communities.

The review found less evidence of a consistent place-based approach across the organisation, despite many examples of strong work with individual residents and families and pockets of effective cross-service collaboration. This distinction highlights the difference between effective individual service interactions and coordinated working around a place.

Services are often experienced by communities as separate interactions rather than as part of a coordinated partnership. There is therefore an opportunity to strengthen community engagement, service integration and co-production, while making better use of local intelligence and insight.

4.7.2 Hubs findings

Work has been undertaken to map out all physical locations within communities from which council services are delivered.

Dorset Council's community-facing facilities do not always function as a connected local network. The council operates a significant range of these assets, including libraries, family hubs, leisure centres and day services.

Opportunities exist to improve coordination, navigation and joint working between council services, community organisations and local facilities, helping improve resident experience and maximise value from existing assets.

4.7.3 Data findings

Work has brought together locality data, community assets and existing service footprints within Dorset Explorer, creating a stronger evidence base for future neighbourhood planning and decision-making.

4.8 Emerging assessment

Participants in Community Conversations consistently expressed a desire for greater influence over decisions affecting their local areas and a stronger role in shaping solutions to local challenges. Taken alongside feedback from partners and emerging learning from the organisation, this evidence suggests a significant opportunity to strengthen place-based working across Dorset.

The findings suggest that a more place-based approach would require a shift in relationships, behaviours and ways of working. Future success is likely to depend on this shift as well as changes to structures, governance or resource allocation. For Dorset Council, this would mean moving beyond being solely a service provider towards a role that increasingly convenes, enables and works alongside communities and partners to achieve shared outcomes.

The evidence points to local capacity, commitment and leadership across Dorset's towns, parishes, voluntary and community organisations and public sector partners. This potential does not, by itself, establish readiness to take on additional responsibilities. Harnessing it effectively will require greater trust, clearer routes for local influence, and a willingness to share responsibility and decision-making where appropriate. As partners have emphasised, taking on greater responsibility also requires capacity-building, funding and ongoing professional support.

A more locally responsive and collaborative model has the potential to improve outcomes for residents, strengthen community resilience and make better use of collective resources across the Dorset system. The next phase will test this potential; the scale and form of future changes will depend on further development and evidence from practical testing.

The intended outcomes set out in the Executive Summary provide the framework against which future pilots and any subsequent implementation will be assessed.

4.9 Next steps

The Community Conversations programme will conclude in early December 2026, after which the findings from all 14 geographic clusters will be analysed and used to develop the council's future approach to community-led and

place-based working.

We will adopt an evidence-led implementation approach, using co-production with community partners. This will involve:

- Moving from discussion to practical testing and local pilots, developed with community partners through co-design.
- Gathering evidence before scaling solutions.
- Establishing clear measures of success and learning objectives for each pilot, covering the locally identified need, resident experience, local influence over decisions, partnership working and resource implications.

Specifically, we plan to run:

- **Local pilots:** We will work with willing partners in each cluster to respond to locally identified needs through a series of local pilot projects. Partners will help design and deliver the projects through co-design. These may relate to issues such as community transport, public realm improvements and the provision of local information and advice.

- **Pan-Dorset Council area pilots**: From January, we will carry out a small number of pilots to test different neighbourhood governance and double devolution arrangements. These pilots will support the development of a new model for working with communities.

- **Continue internal analysis and mapping**, including the design of options for re-modelling the council's locality presence, and voluntary sector commissioning and funding.

- **Identify and secure an independent evaluation partner** to inform decisions on wider implementation of this programme. The partner will assess what the pilots demonstrate about resident experience, local influence, partnership working, risks and resource implications.

Dorset Council ward councillors will continue to play a central role in shaping the next phase of this work. Through the pilots and co-production activity, members will help design future neighbourhood governance arrangements, ensuring that local democratic accountability remains a key feature of any model developed. This will include consideration of the specific roles and responsibilities of ward councillors within future arrangements.

Progress on this work will continue to be shared and shaped with the Executive Advisory Panel. The outcomes will inform recommendations on the

future model for working with communities across Dorset, first to Place and Resources Overview in March 2027 and then to Cabinet in May 2027.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 No future model has yet been selected. Continuing with current arrangements for working with communities has been considered and rejected because the extensive findings and feedback indicate significant opportunities to meet communities' needs more effectively through a different model of partnership and place-based working. This establishes the case for developing alternatives, not for adopting a particular model. Options will be developed through co-production and tested before recommendations are brought forward.

6. Legal considerations

6.1 The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 requires that unitary councils must establish effective neighbourhood governance structures with their communities. We are awaiting further guidance in the forthcoming Rewiring the State White Paper.

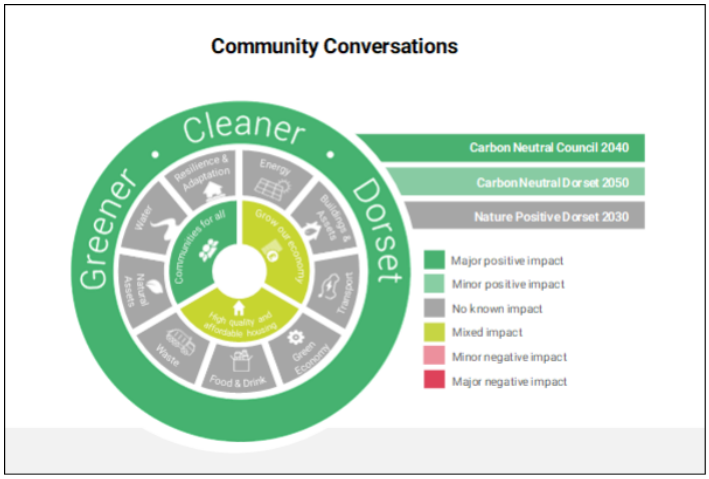
7. Financial implications

7.1 Community Conversations is supported via £0.5m funding secured through Cabinet for communities transformation in October 2025 and £0.3m one-off funding in 2026/27 from contingency, totalling £0.8m.

7.2 The programme aims to support the council's ambitions to achieve long-term financial sustainability. Forthcoming design options will be costed, and those costings will inform the council's medium-term financial plan in due course. The financial implications of a future model will therefore depend on the options developed and tested; this report does not establish the savings that will be achieved.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1



9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 Community empowerment and co-production have the potential to improve outcomes across service areas, including public health, housing and planning. Potential benefits include improvements in health and wellbeing, community resilience, public trust and service effectiveness, as well as cost savings. These are potential benefits of the approach, not demonstrated outcomes of Dorset's Community Conversations programme. Evaluation of the next phase will be important in establishing which benefits are achieved locally.

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.

Findings will also inform our future design as a prevention-focused council, building on the work begun by Children's 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.

10. Other implications

10.1 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: Medium

Residual Risk: Low

12. Equalities

12.1 This work is intended to improve outcomes for all residents, including people with protected characteristics. It aims to strengthen how Dorset Council listens to, understands and responds to the needs of different communities. A more place-based approach has the potential to create greater opportunities to engage with underrepresented groups, amplify local voices and ensure that services and decision-making are informed by a broader range of lived experiences.

Through stronger community relationships, improved local insight and ongoing co-production with residents and partners, this programme has the potential to support more inclusive service design and help reduce inequalities across Dorset. Equalities impacts will continue to be considered as proposals are developed and tested through the next phase of implementation.

13. Appendices

13.1 Appendix A shows a map of the 14 clusters across the Dorset Council area, along with a list of the places in each cluster.

14. Background papers

14.1 None

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 Assurance & Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)