

Title of Report:	Digital Update
Committee Report Submitted To:	Leisure & Development Committee
Date of Meeting:	17 June 2025
For Decision or For Information	For Information
To be discussed In Committee	NO

Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
Strategic Theme	Improvement and Innovation
Outcome	Businesses and household have access to high quality broadband which supports the digital economy and the development of learning and skills.
Lead Officer	Head of Prosperity & Place

Estimated Timescale for Completion	
Date to be Completed	Long-term objective

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	N/A
Included in Current Year Estimates	N/A
Capital/Revenue	N/A
Code	N/A
Staffing Costs	N/A

Legal Considerations	
Input of Legal Services Required	NO
Legal Opinion Obtained	N/A

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on digital connectivity and transformation within the Borough.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Members will be aware that since 2020 (i.e. COVID-19 pandemic), the pace of digital change has accelerated dramatically — reshaping how people live, work, and interact with public services. For local authorities like ours, this shift presents both significant opportunities and new responsibilities.
- 2.2 This update outlines the progress made in enhancing digital infrastructure across the Borough, as well as the strategic initiatives underway to ensure services are modern, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of residents and businesses.
- 2.3 Improved broadband coverage, the rollout of full fibre, and the integration of new technologies like artificial intelligence are enabling more efficient operations and better user experiences. At the same time, it is recognised that digital transformation is not just about technology — it's about ensuring equitable access, building trust, and creating services that work for everyone.
- 2.4 Officers are working in collaboration with external partners on a number of initiatives to make Causeway Coast and Glens a connected, innovative, and digitally empowered place to live and work.

3.0 Digital Connectivity

3.1 Broadband

- Full fibre availability in Northern Ireland remains the highest in the UK, at 93%, compared to England (69%), Wales (68%) and Scotland (62%). This is a result of a combination of significant early commercial rollout and publicly funded schemes (Full Fibre Northern Ireland and Project Stratum) designed to improve broadband in rural areas.
- 3.2 Around 2,000 premises in Northern Ireland cannot access a decent fixed broadband service, Officers are working to understand how many of these premises are within our Borough.
- 3.3 It should also be noted that 47% of the homes and businesses who have access to superfast, or better broadband don't subscribe to these services.
- 3.4 The below table highlights coverage of superfast and full-fibre broadband by local authority (% of premises)

Local authority	Superfast (≥30Mbit/s)	Change since 2023	Full Fibre	Change since 2023
Antrim and Newtownabbey	99%	+3pp	97%	+4pp
Ards and North Down	99%	Unchanged	95%	+1pp
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	98%	-1pp ¹⁵	93%	+1pp
Belfast	c100%	Unchanged	93%	Unchanged
Causeway Coast and Glens	96%	+1pp	89%	+2pp
Derry City and Strabane	98%	Unchanged	93%	Unchanged
Fermanagh and Omagh	94%	Unchanged	87%	+2pp
Lisburn and Castlereagh	99%	+1pp	95%	+2pp
Mid And East Antrim	98%	+2pp	95%	+4pp
Mid Ulster	97%	Unchanged	90%	+2pp
Newry, Mourne and Down	98%	Unchanged	93%	+1pp

Source: Ofcom analysis of operator data (July 2024).

3.5 Project Gigabit Update

The Department for the Economy provided the following update on 29th May 2025.

“The procurement for Project Gigabit commenced on 11th November 2024, with an invitation to interested suppliers to complete a selection questionnaire to demonstrate their capacity and capability to deliver such a contract. Those suppliers who met the published criteria of the selection questionnaire were invited to submit a response to the requirements of the Invitation to Tender.

The procurement is currently at the Invitation to Tender Stage and closed on 22nd May 2025. Evaluation will take place in June. Subject to any necessary approvals and value for money assessments being given, we would hope to be able to announce a decision in July. The procurement is seeking a supplier to address an initial scope of approximately 11,000 premises.”

- 3.6 Members can keep up to date with developments on Project Gigabit via: [Project Gigabit | Department for the Economy](#).

3.7 Mobile Connectivity - Shared Rural Network

In 2020 the UK Government and MNOs signed an agreement to deliver the Shared Rural Network (SRN). The programme aimed to make 4G mobile coverage available to 95% of the UK. In Northern Ireland, where the programme has now completed, 4G coverage has risen to 85% (up from 75%) from all four MNOs since the programme was agreed.

3.8 Mobile Connectivity – 5G

Ofcom’s latest [Connected Nations 2024](#) report shows that almost 99% of premises in NI are able to access a 4G signal from at least one mobile operator. 5G coverage continues to roll out and 71% of Northern Ireland’s landmass is now covered by at least one operator.

- 3.9 Across Northern Ireland’s 11 Local Councils, outside premises coverage for 5G from at least one operator varies. As is to be expected coverage is lower in more rural and sparsely populated local authority areas.

- 3.10 The below table Local authority 5G outside premises coverage from at least one Mobile Network Operator (MNOs):

Local authority	High Confidence	Very High Confidence
Antrim And Newtownabbey	99%	94%
Ards And North Down	92%	84%
Armagh City, Banbridge And Craigavon	97%	88%
Belfast	99%+	99%
Causeway Coast And Glens	90%	80%
Derry City And Strabane	88%	84%
Fermanagh And Omagh	60%	51%
Lisburn And Castlereagh	97%	91%
Mid And East Antrim	96%	89%
Mid Ulster	90%	79%
Newry, Mourne And Down	86%	77%

Source: Ofcom analysis of operator data (September 2024).

4.0 **Digital Transformation Flexible Fund**

- 4.1 Officers have been working in partnership with the 10 other Councils to deliver the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) since it launched in November 2023. The fund operates under the Full Fibre NI Consortium, and is led by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, with support from Invest NI.
- 4.2 DTFF is delivered through funding calls, which take place approximately every four months. To date, there have been three 'calls' for funding completed. Each funding call includes the following process:
- Pre-Briefing sessions are held to inform businesses of the fund and answer questions, held locally and online.
 - Businesses are then required to submit an expression of interest for their project.
 - Eligible businesses are called forward to submit a full application.
 - Applications are assessed and the outcome is communicated to businesses.
 - Unsuccessful applicants can reapply in the next call for funding, with no business eligible to receive DTFF grant aid more than twice.
- 4.3 The table below provides an update on funding calls to date, for the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area:

Funding Call	Expressions of Interest Received	Businesses Successfully Funded	Value of Funding Awarded
Call 1 (Jan 2025)	5	2	£39,283.30
Call 2 (May 2024)	11	0	£0.00
Call 3 (October 2024)	14	6	£89,285.71

- 4.4 Examples of Causeway Coast and Glens DTFF projects funded in Calls One to Three include:
- Software and capital equipment to enable a food manufacture and distribution company to automate their labelling – Members can view a case study on this

project via: [Annie's Traditional Food - Driving Food Production Efficiency with IoT & Smart Monitoring](#)

- Specialist machinery, combined with bespoke software solutions to enable a manufacturing business to improve efficiency, precision and quality.
- Internet of Things (IoT) to introduce automated, self-monitoring and reporting of temperature on commercial chills, cold storage and packaging for food production business

4.5 Call Four Update

A different approach was taken for this call, with the Go Succeed programme providing 'wraparound support' in the form of special digital transformation mentoring between January and March 2025. This support was critical for businesses looking to advance with their digital transformations.

- 4.6 25 businesses from the Causeway Coast and Glens area received 402 hours of specialist mentoring to support digital transformation and prepare them to apply for DTFF grant aid in future calls, i.e. Call Four, Call Five or Call Six. Mentoring support included assistance in creating a 5-year digital transformation plan, sourcing suppliers and solutions, and help with the application form to DTFF.
- 4.7 In calls One to Four, businesses also received support from the InnovateUS programme through the Northern Regional College.
- 4.8 The deadline for applications in Call Four was 30th April 2025. The table below provides details, in relation to Causeway Coast and Glens businesses who applied for funding in this Call.

Funding Call	Expressions of Interest Received	Applications for Funding Received	Eligible Applications Currently Being Assessed
Call 4 (April 2025)	37	20	14

- 4.9 Businesses who have applied for funding in Call Four will be notified early June 2025. The deadline for applications to the next Call is 29th August 2025.

4.10 Challenges

Officers are aware that businesses have faced challenges in relation to the DTFF and have tried to help address them, such as:

- Lack of understanding around how to transform their business, with projects aligning with digitisation, rather than digital transformation.

Digitisation is the process of converting information from a physical or analogue format into a digital one. For example, scanning paper documents into PDFs, replacing paper forms with online forms, or using Excel instead of handwritten logs.

Digital Transformation is the broader, strategic process of using digital technologies to fundamentally change how an organisation operates, delivers services, and creates value. For example, redesigning a council's waste management system to allow real-time tracking, automated notifications, and resident feedback via an app — not just digitising a paper form.

- Lack of knowledge around how to implement or understand the six technologies funded and the benefits to their business, i.e. blockchain, big data, internet of things, artificial intelligence. These areas often require specialist support.
 - DTFF application process involves the development of a digital transformation plan, outlining 1-5 year journey and complying with strict procurement process which businesses found time consuming and challenging
- 4.11 These challenges are demonstrated in the numbers. Across all Councils, 588 businesses have submitted an Expression of Interest in Calls One to Three. 171 of these businesses went on to be successful with an application for funding - a conversation rate of 29%.
- 4.12 The conversion rate in Causeway Coast and Glens for businesses submitting an EOI, through to gaining funding in DTFF is 30% across Calls One to Three, slightly above the NI average.

5.0 Review of Council's Digital Strategy

- 5.1 Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council's (herein Council) current Digital Strategy developed in 2020 and was shaped during a time of significant uncertainty due to COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. Since then, the digital landscape has evolved rapidly, along with fundamental changes in how people work, learn, and access public services.
- 5.2 These shifts necessitate a refreshed strategy that reflects today's environment and prepares the Council to respond proactively to future digital demands.
- 5.3 As identified in the Prosperity & Place Business Plan for 2025/26, this refresh will be completed in this financial year and will:
- Assess progress made against the actions and objectives outlined in the 2020 strategy.
 - Identify gaps or outdated sections in light of technological, policy, economic, or societal changes.
 - Integrate new opportunities, challenges, and innovations (e.g., 6G, AI, Internet of Things, remote services, hybrid working).
 - Identify a number of locations within the Borough that would be suitable for a 5G/6G district
 - Ensure alignment with current Council priorities (Corporate Strategy, Economic Development Strategy), the Community Plan (2017–2030), the Growth Deal, and UK/NI digital and economic strategies.
 - Produce an updated strategy with actionable, measurable goals and an implementation plan.

6.0 Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the information in this report.