

Digital Strategy for Hertfordshire 2026/36

DRAFT
MAY 2026



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Foreword

The Vision set out in **Hertfordshire's new Economic Strategy (2026/36)** is that by 2036, Hertfordshire will be recognised globally as the UK's innovation heartland, with a high-value, productive and sustainable economy where people, businesses and communities thrive. **Digital transformation is central to achieving this ambition.**

This **Digital Strategy** sets out how Hertfordshire will harness digital connectivity, data, technology and AI to drive productivity, unlock innovation and ensure every resident and business benefits from the opportunities ahead. It accompanies the **Hertfordshire Economic Strategy 2026-36** and provides the digital foundation for a decade of inclusive, innovation-led growth. It also forms a core building block for Hertfordshire's emerging Local Growth Plan, ensuring digital priorities are embedded in wider plans for housing, infrastructure and economic development.

Digital technology underpins every part of Hertfordshire's economy, from life sciences and advanced manufacturing to defence, clean energy, creative industries and professional services. Major investment in data centres, studio expansion and advanced computing infrastructure is reshaping Hertfordshire's global competitiveness. This strategy aligns our digital priorities with these fast-moving growth sectors, ensuring the county can attract inward investment, scale businesses and support high-value job creation.

But digital transformation is not only about infrastructure and industry. It is also about people. To succeed, every resident must have access to the skills, confidence and connectivity they need to participate fully in modern life. Digital inclusion, AI-enabled skills development, and new models of training – delivered through our schools, colleges, universities and employers – will be essential to unlocking opportunity and addressing longstanding barriers to work.

Digital investment also plays a vital role in place-making. As Hertfordshire plans for new homes, growth locations and thriving town centres, world-class digital connectivity will be integral to sustainable communities, flexible workspaces, smart transport systems and modern public services. Our approach aligns digital infrastructure with the Local Growth Plan, supporting the development of new communities, innovation districts and employment space across the county.

This strategy provides a clear and practical roadmap which will underpin the Economic Strategy's first priority, *digital creativity at the heart of business*, while also supporting wider priorities on skills, thriving places, commercialisation and global competitiveness. It sets out how we will expand gigabit connectivity, improve mobile coverage, reduce digital exclusion, support AI adoption, and strengthen Hertfordshire's position as a leader in digital creativity and technology-driven innovation.

Working with partners across local government, industry, education and the voluntary sector, we will ensure that digital transformation delivers real value for Hertfordshire, boosting productivity, supporting inclusive growth, and enabling every community to feel the benefits of the county's growing role on the national and global stage.

Adrian Hawkins OBE,
Chair, Hertfordshire Futures



The journey of digital transformation

Over the last decade, the importance of the digital sphere has grown exponentially. Digital solutions now underpin every dimension of social and economic life, in Hertfordshire as elsewhere. Additionally, through its capacity to learn from data and make decisions, the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) – and the enormous opportunities, risks and vulnerabilities linked to it – has created particular momentum and urgency.

In the policy domain, the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy identifies 'digital' as a core growth engine which will enable productivity, competitiveness and resilience across all sectors. This includes priority growth sectors (the IS-8). But the ambit of digital transformation is much wider. It is affecting most of the 'everyday economy' – shaping how services (from healthcare to retail to travel to leisure activities) are delivered and 'consumed'.

Pervasive digitisation is creating new possibilities whilst also causing economic and social disruption and dislocation. For example, jobs and careers are being redefined: entry roles in financial and business services are reducing in number and changing in form (presenting fewer opportunities for young people in particular) while livelihoods are being built by monetising the voice of social media influencers (a phenomenon that was unimaginable a generation ago).

Nationally, digital priorities are multi-dimensional. They span advanced connectivity (5G, 6G, satellite, fibre); AI; cybersecurity; engineering biology; quantum technologies; and semiconductors (focused on design, R&D and advanced materials). These are simultaneously sectors, strategic infrastructure; and competencies. They are also matters of sovereign capability. These national priorities

provide a foundation for Hertfordshire's digital ambitions.

Building on what has gone before...

Through Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), Hertfordshire Growth Board (HGB) and, previously, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), there has been a series of strategies, plans and programmes to equip businesses and communities to respond to the challenges and opportunities linked to digital transformation. Much has been achieved through them – albeit the bar has shifted (and is still shifting) relentlessly and rapidly.

In delivery terms, Hertfordshire's *Connected Counties* programme was particularly important. With funding from DCMS (through BDUK) and working with BT Openreach, it sought to address market failures and roll out superfast broadband (24Mbps) across the county¹; it was delivered very successfully between 2013 and 2021, and uptake far exceeded expectations. In 2022, it was superseded by *Project Gigabit* which is delivering full-fibre (gigabit-capable (1,000Mbps/1Gb)) broadband to homes, businesses and public buildings that commercial providers would not otherwise reach.

¹ At the time this programme was launched, superfast broadband was defined as 24 Mbps. The definition was updated in 2017, and now

superfast broadband is more usually considered to be 30 Mbps



Since 2024, the delivery of *Project Gigabit* has been framed within a wider Digital Hertfordshire programme. This has been expanded to include mobile coverage, digital inclusion and advanced technology exploration. The Digital Hertfordshire delivery team is now part of **Hertfordshire Futures**, the successor organisation to Hertfordshire LEP (within HCC), creating a very clear link to the Economic Strategy.

In terms of strategy, **Hertfordshire Growth Board** identified '*digital access for all*' as one of six missions – with the aim of ensuring that 'every Hertfordshire resident has access to best-in-class connectivity, essential digital skills and the device or support that they need to be online by 2030'. It provided a broader framework within which full-fibre, mobile coverage and digital inclusion might be advanced at scale.

Its work has been shaped by a framework document, **Towards Digital Growth (2021)**, which was developed by Hertfordshire LEP and HCC in 2021. Informed by extensive market engagement in the midst of the pandemic, it identified four high level priorities. The intention always was that the framework document would pave the way for a full **Digital Strategy**, recognising that every person and household in Hertfordshire – as well

as every business and employer – needs to be able to engage confidently in the digital sphere, and to harness it effectively while mitigating associated risks.

...and looking to the next decade

Hertfordshire's **Economic Strategy, 2026-36**, identified **digital creativity at the heart of business** as one of five main priorities. Over the period to 2036, it committed to: investing in digital skills and digital literacy; supporting businesses to embrace AI to improve productivity; developing Hertfordshire's digital infrastructure; positioning University of Hertfordshire as an anchor institution at the heart of digital creativity; and encouraging the clustering of digital businesses around data centres.

Fulfilling the earlier commitment from **Towards Digital Growth (2021)**, this document – **Hertfordshire's Digital Strategy, 2026-36** – gives more precise expression to digital themes from the Economic Strategy. It is intentionally delivery focused. With strong foundations – and a track record of clear achievement – it provides an important route map for Hertfordshire over the decade ahead.



Vision and Ambitions

Hertfordshire's Digital Strategy is defined around a Vision for 2036 which recognises the pace of change but also the huge potential opportunities for Hertfordshire's businesses and communities linked to it. Implicitly, it also recognises many of the risks. The Vision will be achieved by advancing – with purpose – four Ambitions. All four are of equal importance, and partners across Hertfordshire are committed to them.

Hertfordshire Digital Strategy, 2026-36

Our **Vision** is that Hertfordshire will be recognised as a connected, inclusive, and sustainable digital county in which world-class infrastructure, thriving businesses, and responsible data centre growth enable opportunity, innovation, and prosperity for all

Ambition 1:

Digital infrastructure

Investing in broadband and mobile provision so that every home and workplace is – and continues to be – well connected

Ambition 2:

Digital inclusion

Ensuring that households and businesses can participate confidently in the digital sphere, and that no one feels excluded

Ambition 3:

Digital adoption

Encouraging businesses across Hertfordshire to embrace the potential of data as a route to innovation, enterprise and greater productivity

Ambition 4:

Digital development

Building energy efficient data centre ecosystems as a critical national infrastructure and a route to sustainable economic growth locally



Ambition 1: Digital infrastructure

Investing in broadband and mobile provision so that every home and workplace is – and continues to be – well connected.

There are two strands within Ambition 1. These relate to broadband and mobile infrastructures. In both cases, the bar – in terms of ‘what good looks like’ – has risen sharply. It will continue to rise rapidly over the next decade.

On both fronts, Hertfordshire needs to have an outstanding digital infrastructure if its wider ambitions and potentials are to be realised, and the Vision set out in its new Economic Strategy, 2026-36, is to be achieved.

A: Broadband infrastructure

Context

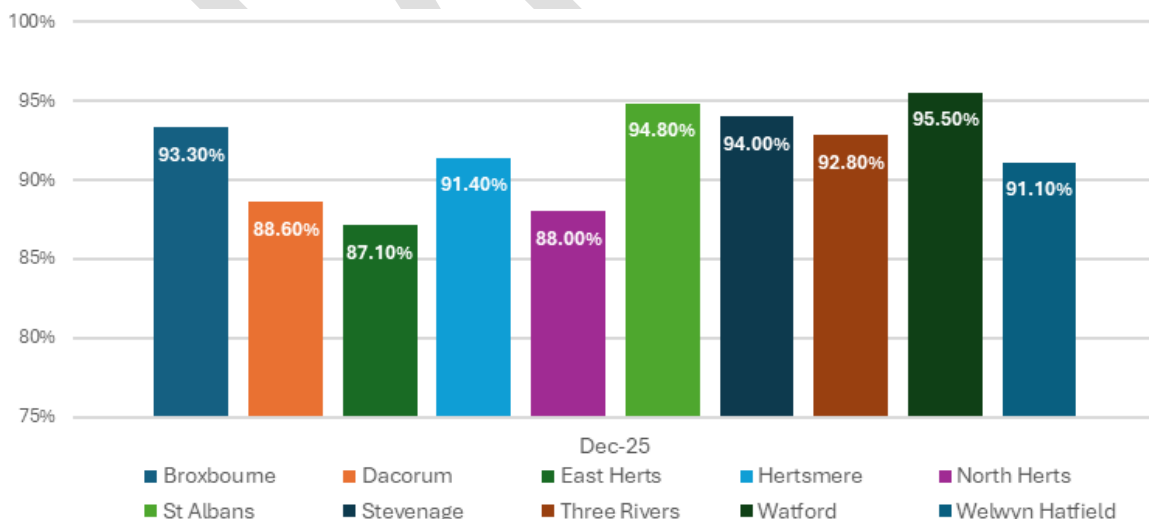
As of September 2025, Hertfordshire’s Superfast broadband coverage (defined as speeds of 30Mbps and above) stood at 98.9%. Nevertheless, roughly 4,500 premises remain without a basic connection, leaving them unable to perform even simple online tasks. The average UK household now owns approximately nine internet-enabled devices. The rapid proliferation of connected devices has far outpaced the rollout of broadband. This in turn has prompted a response.

In January 2026, Hertfordshire had 91.5% gigabit coverage compared to 89.7% nationally. This

represented a substantial change over the previous decade: in January 2017, Hertfordshire had 0.3% gigabit coverage.

Action is required to ensure that the remaining premises are not left behind. In the main, rural areas typically have a lower incidence of gigabit coverage, in part, due to the trickier geographical conditions and distance from existing exchanges. Over recent years gigabit growth has targeted these harder to reach locations – and some progress has been made. However in terms of the final roll-out, the more urban districts are now also seeing slower delivery.

Figure 1: Hertfordshire’s Gigabit coverage by District, as at December 2025



Multi-dwelling Units (MDUs) – often found in the middle of towns – are a cause for concern in the roll out of full fibre (FTTP) broadband. Each is unique in its set up of existing infrastructure, with freeholders, property managers and landlords all required to give permission via wayleaves to providers to access and deploy broadband within the buildings.

With the addition of planning, design reviews, and tenant approvals, MDUs can lead to a low return on investment, and they are often therefore the last premises to be considered for delivery. There is now however, a price premium on the properties with better connectivity and faster speeds. This may begin to act as an incentive for landlords/freeholders to improve their building broadband provision.

Challenges and priorities

Robust digital infrastructure is a foundational requirement for the delivery of the Economic Strategy, 2026-36. In particular:

It is critical in relation to the delivery of new housing, underpinning digitally enabled homes, supporting flexible working, improving access to services, and ensuring communities are resilient and future-ready from the outset.

It supports town centre regeneration by enabling modern retail and workspace models, improving public services, and enhancing the attractiveness and economic vitality of place.

It is a key enabler of growth corridors and innovation districts, supporting business attraction, innovation, collaboration, and the development of high-value employment opportunities.

While government is committed to improving gigabit connections, requirements over the next decade will be greater again. With the move towards smart homes and increased reliance on technology, 1Gb speeds may quickly be obsolete and even faster speeds will be required. This is why full fibre solutions (particularly symmetrical) that offer the capability for 10Gb and more, will allow the county to grow without future infrastructure deployments being required.

Two main delivery routes will be important:

Delivery by commercial providers: Deployment from both alt-nets and larger broadband network operators have been instrumental in boosting gigabit coverage. Between January 2023 and January 2025 (and without government funded delivery programmes), gigabit coverage grew by 6.4% across Hertfordshire. The rate of year-on-year growth has however been falling and is in line with the decline of individual alt-nets across the UK in general. Fixed line broadband is still the primary digital infrastructure. There is scope to enhance it through wayleave agreements and flexible planning policies. However, there are complexities to this delivery that will mean alternative solutions and additional funding will be required so that every residential and business premises across the county can benefit from gigabit broadband.

Public sector intervention – Project Gigabit:

Government launched its £5 billion Project Gigabit delivery programme in 2022. This was designed to provide some of the harder-to-reach communities with access to gigabit-capable broadband. The timeframe for this programme has been extended from 2030 to 2032, with Hertfordshire benefiting from multiple contracts as part of this programme.

Actions

In delivering priorities for broadband across Hertfordshire, we will:

- support the ongoing delivery of UK government initiatives, such as Project Gigabit
- work in partnership with surrounding local authorities to share knowledge and learn from best practice
- work with industry partners to maintain momentum and meet national targets.
- attract telecoms investment, demonstrating that Hertfordshire is open for fibre deployment and welcoming alt-net providers
- explore alternative technologies to connect hard-to-reach areas.
- ensure broadband infrastructure is integrated into all Local Plans



- campaign for increased government support and exploring future funding opportunities
- identify and mapping the areas of most need for broadband infrastructure intervention
- work with housing providers to identify areas of need and encourage a joined-up approach to providing MDU access

Through these and other interventions, by 2036, we aim to:

- achieve over 90% Full Fibre countywide coverage
- achieve 99-100% countywide gigabit coverage (with over 96% Gigabit capable coverage being achieved countywide by 2030)
- develop solutions for the remaining 1% (e.g. by ensuring all council owned social housing has access to gigabit capable infrastructure; and supporting access for all multi-dwelling units (MDUs) to gigabit capable infrastructure)

B: Mobile infrastructure

Context

At first glance it may appear that 4G coverage extends across the county. However there is much variation at a local level. Much of the mobile network is also reliant on fibre and so until the core fibre network is in place, mobile coverage will struggle to expand, particularly in rural areas.

A lot of publicly available coverage data is provided by mobile network operators and based on predictions rather than through accurate speed testing – so there is some uncertainty in terms of the ‘true’ picture. As of early 2026, according to Signalchecker², the signal score based on coverage and performance for Hertfordshire in both 4G and 5G is as follows:

EE – 71.9%
O2 – 82.0%
Three – 66.3%
Vodafone – 71.0%

The merger between Vodafone and Three in mid-2025 has improved coverage for some customers. This is also the case for MVNOs (Mobile Virtual Network Operators) using their networks. For example, Talkmobile and VOXI previously used Vodafone’s network, but they will now also have access to Three’s network.

Challenges and priorities

Monthly mobile data traffic continues to grow across England, increasing by 17% between 2024 and 2025³. This is predominantly 4G data traffic. 5G use is significantly on the rise. Increased demand has already begun to put the networks under pressure.

With the 3G network giving way to 4G and 5G services, there is a risk that rural areas have very little mobile coverage. This will be compounded for those with old mobile devices (as they cannot use the 4G/5G network). The impending analogue landline phone switch over to digital (PSTN switch off) presents another challenge.

Ofcom, as the national regulator, imposes coverage obligations on Mobile Network Operators (MNOs). However, it is for the operator to decide what this will look like in terms of infrastructure and specific location. This often means that areas with fewer commercial benefits for the operators, such as rural settlements, are more susceptible to poor mobile coverage.

Growth

The roll out of new and additional mobile infrastructure has been hampered by high capital costs for building and upgrading sites. MNOs and Neutral Host companies have also struggled with planning barriers and complex approval

² [Mobile coverage in Hertfordshire for EE, O2, Three, Vodafone | Signalchecker.co.uk](https://www.signalchecker.co.uk)

³ [Connected Nations 2025 England Report](#)



processes. There is also a limited return on investment in the more rural areas which leads to operators focusing on the towns and more urban areas.

Infrastructure sharing arrangements such as the proposed Shared Rural Network venture in the UK will significantly lower network deployment costs and are expected to serve as an impetus to improve outdoor coverage in rural settlements.

Data

The transparency of mobile data is an issue for authorities when trying to support the growth of mobile coverage. Independent mobile data gathering has revealed areas with minimal mobile coverage. The picture appears to be worse than portrayed by Ofcom and mobile network operators.

Capacity

Although the coverage picture may look positive for most urban areas, there are sometimes issues with capacity in built up/high footfall areas. With everyone competing for network capacity and significantly increased demand in data consumption, the existing network is under immense pressure.

One solution is to use Small Cells; compact lower powered units that boost localised coverage and are often mounted on street furniture such as lighting columns. This is a cost-effective solution compared to large towers but does require adequate fibre and electricity availability.

Actions

In delivering priorities for mobile across Hertfordshire, we will:

- work more closely with the mobile industry and local leaders to encourage mobile growth
- facilitate telecoms access to public assets such as council-owned buildings and street furniture
- develop and promote a Small Cell Open Access licence agreement with potential to expand for the use of other digital technologies such as water smart meters
- identify and map the areas of most need for mobile infrastructure intervention

- undertake a public consultation to better understand coverage and capacity issues and the impact on the local community
- share our learning and best practice
- engage Neutral Hosts for small cell and telecoms tower deployment
- contribute to local growth plans to encourage the inclusion of digital infrastructure as a priority

Through these and other interventions, by 2036, we aim to:

- increase mobile coverage across all three MNOs
- improve the availability of local authority assets for telecoms equipment use
- ensure we have a clear picture of mobile coverage and reduce obvious 'not-spots'
- support the building of additional mobile infrastructure
- increase mobile network capacity in built up/high-traffic areas
- support MNOs to upgrade existing macro sites to higher spectrums where possible
- increase the number of 5G SA locations.



Ambition 2: Digital inclusion

Ensuring that households and businesses can participate confidently in the digital sphere, and that no one feels excluded.

Context

Unequal access to the digital technologies that are essential to everyday life – coupled with a lack of confidence/skills in using them – present fundamental barriers to digital inclusion. In practice, three main factors are often in play:

- **access** to connectivity and infrastructure
- **affordability** of services and devices
- **confidence/skills** to use the technology.

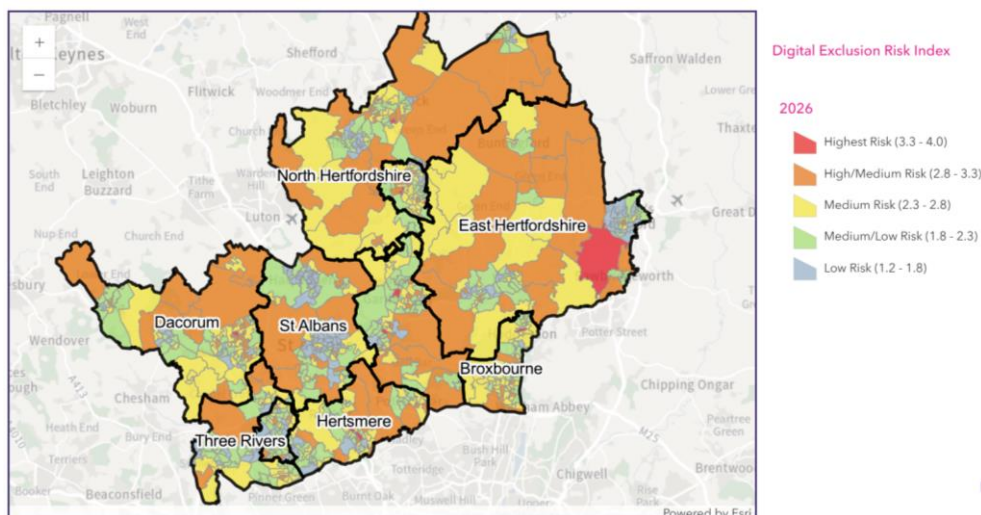
Digital exclusion can severely affect life chances. According to the *Good Things Foundation*, 90% of jobs within the UK are now advertised solely

online⁴, yet around 52% of adults lack basic digital skills.

Across the county, analysts from Hertfordshire Insights (part of Hertfordshire County Council) have developed a **digital exclusion risk index (DERI)**⁵.

This takes into account both local data on broadband speeds (as a proxy for access) and the characteristics and demography of the local population. It suggests that people and businesses in rural areas are typically at greatest risk of exclusion – presenting particular challenges in East Hertfordshire and North Hertfordshire. Conversely, the areas with lowest risk tend to be in the larger urban areas.

Figure 2: Digital exclusion risk index across Hertfordshire



⁴ See [Get Online Week | UK's Largest Digital Inclusion Campaign | Good Things Foundation](#)

⁵ See [Broadband Coverage & Digital Exclusion - County | Hertfordshire | Report Builder for ArcGIS](#)

Source: Herts Insights. Data Sources - OFCOM Connected Nations, Office for National Statistics, DWP, MHCLG and CACI Limited © 1979 – 2026 CACI Limited

While there are clear barriers to digital inclusion, there is also an element of personal choice: no one should be forced to embrace digital change.

For those currently digitally excluded or not willing to bridge the digital divide, accessible alternatives should be put in place to allow them to participate fully in everyday life. Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) are therefore important in relation to 'digital only' solutions. At the same time, in 'nudging' residents or customers to make the switch to digital, service must be accessible and easy to use.

Digital exclusion also affects businesses. Rural businesses are less likely to have adequate infrastructure in place and may therefore need to spend more on a lease line as their only option for reliable broadband which may simply not be affordable. As technology advances there is also the possibility of skills gaps within businesses. These can hamper progress and advancement, with businesses being reluctant to invest in new systems (see Ambition Three).

Box 1: Tools to support digital inclusion

Two guides are helpful in seeking to increase digital inclusion:

- The **Essential Digital Skills Framework**¹ (EDSF) was developed by UK government and published in 2018. It defines the skills needed to safely participate in the digital world, identifying five categories of essential digital skills for life and work.



Source: Essential Digital Skills Framework, UK Government, 2018

- The **Minimum Digital Living Standards**¹ (MDLS) was developed in 2025 by the Good Things Foundation to pinpoint what households need to feel digitally included. It explains that a minimum digital living standard includes having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect, and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.



Challenges and priorities

We want to ensure that everyone in Hertfordshire has access to the skills, training and employment opportunities that they need to participate fully in everyday life. To do this we need to:

- address the basic digital skills shortages at all ages which will in turn boost confidence in using technology and digital devices
- tackle issues linked to affordability

- provide targeted support for those in need.

Hertfordshire already has a **Digital Help Finder**⁶ tool, which was developed in partnership with Mortar and Essex County Council. The tool helps users identify basic digital skills needed in work and life settings. It provides a directory of localised support for skills training personalised to an individual's needs and location. Through further development and promotion, the Digital Help Finder should also inform assessments of social return on investment and identify areas of required additional support.

Figure 3: Hertfordshire's Digital Help Finder



Source: Hertfordshire Digital Help finder - see [Digital Help Finder - Hertfordshire](#)

⁶ [Digital Help Finder - Hertfordshire](#)



Actions

In delivering priorities linked to digital inclusion, we will:

- take an evidence-based approach, using data from the DERI to identify and prioritise areas of need
- set up a Digital Inclusion network to share key information and opportunities, actively engaging with VCSE organisations
- identify social value and impact measures to quantify the impact of digital Inclusion initiatives
- engage with local communities to understand their digital needs and challenges
- promote Social Tariffs and cheaper packages available to residents
- set up/coordinate a device recycling and distribution scheme
- identify, promote and coordinate existing Digital Champion training opportunities
- ensure inclusion of basic digital skills as a priority within the revised Hertfordshire Skills Strategy and the refreshed Local Skills Improvement Plan, and make clear links to priorities within the Get Hertfordshire Working Plan

- identify and promote funding opportunities with partners
- use the Digital Help Finder tool more effectively to boost support on offer.

Through these and other interventions, by 2036, we aim to:

- ensure all residents of Hertfordshire regardless of personal circumstance have the opportunity to be digitally included (and understand the drawbacks if they choose not to be)
- provide residents with the support they need to access affordable broadband and mobile packages, and basic digital devices
- develop a clear picture of places and communities which are in need of additional support
- boost basic digital skills provision to empower individuals to navigate and use digital technology in their everyday lives
- use impact measurement to evidence the effect of digital inclusion on the local economy
- provide education so that residents can become 'cyber aware' and are safe online.



Ambition 3: Digital adoption

Encouraging businesses across Hertfordshire to embrace the potential of data as a route to innovation, enterprise and greater productivity.

Context

Digital businesses in Hertfordshire...

Within Hertfordshire, there is a growing array of specialist and innovative digital sectors. These include cybersecurity (e.g. Smiths Detection and Cobra Security Systems); semiconductors (e.g. Imagination Technologies); animation and creative industries (e.g. King Bee Animation, Lumara Studio); and logistics (noting that major businesses in Hertfordshire which are innovators in logistics include Ocado and Tesco).

In addition, the county's key growth sectors – like life sciences and advanced manufacturing/defence – are increasingly digital in character. Data science underpins life sciences through the likes of bioinformatics, clinical analytics, and drug discovery optimisation. In advanced manufacturing and defence, it drives predictive maintenance, digital twins, and supply chain intelligence. AI and big data also support innovation, efficiency and regulatory compliance.

However in a real sense, the vast majority of Hertfordshire's 66,000 enterprises are also digital businesses (including those in the foundational economy). Even for small and micro businesses, digital solutions are used to communicate with customers and staff, to organise supply chains and inventories, to underpin core business functions (e.g. invoicing, recruitment), and to codify both services and (increasingly) products.

...and links to productivity

Digital adoption is a catalyst for innovation, particularly in business processes. Across the piece, there is evidence to suggest a link between digital adoption and business performance in relation to productivity, growth, and resilience. Firm-level data from ONS shows that technology adopters exhibit higher productivity than non-adopters, although these gains are also closely tied to complementary management practices and organisational capability⁷. Separately, the *SME Digital Adoption Taskforce* identified firm-level productivity gains of 7-18% per technology (e.g. customer relationship management systems, e-commerce platforms, and enterprise software) through process streamlining and reduced administrative burdens⁸. Overall, the evidence suggests that digital adoption is a driver of SME performance, but with outcomes that vary depending on technology choice, intensity of use, and firms' internal capabilities.

In response, there have been various programmes to encourage digital adoption. Nationally, **Help to Grow: Digital** was launched in 2022 to raise productivity and digital capability among small firms. However uptake was very low, in part because the range of software tools was narrow, and the programme ceased to operate after a year⁹. Currently, **Made Smarter** is being delivered at a regional level. It is supporting manufacturing SMEs to adopt digital technologies such as automation, data analytics and AI. Early uptake has been relatively strong – although there is, as yet, little evidence in relation to its impacts.

⁷ See Office for National Statistics (2025), *Management practices and the adoption of technology and AI in UK firms*

⁸ See UK Government (2025), *SME Digital Adoption Taskforce: Final Report*

⁹ See RSM UK Consulting LLP (2023) *Evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital: Final Evaluation Report*. London: Department for Business and Trade. [\[gov.uk\]](https://gov.uk)



As set out in the **Economic Strategy, 2026-36**, Hertfordshire has an on-going challenge in relation to productivity growth. Effective digital solutions and associated digital skills will need to be adopted across all parts of the economy – across every sector, and in relation to businesses of all sizes.

Digital skills

The corollary is that digital skills are increasingly important across Hertfordshire. A major survey of employers (2024/25) unearthed compelling evidence. In a report by Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce (published in the context of the Local Skills Improvement Plan), the following observations were made:

IT and digital skills are now the most sought-after by employers in Hertfordshire, with demand rising from 46% of employers in 2022/23 to 51% in 2024/25 – a jump of five percentage points. This reflects the growing role of AI, data tools, cloud systems and automation across all sectors. Whether it is marketing, healthcare, logistics or construction, businesses increasingly need staff who can confidently work with digital systems and adapt to new technologies¹⁰

Digital skills – and both skills needs and skills gaps – range from very basic digital literacy through to advanced data science. A range of provision has been developed in response. **Hertfordshire's Digital Help Finder** and **Step2Skills¹¹** (which delivers basic IT skills, digital literacy, and employability/work-based digital skills) play a key role in terms of digital inclusion.

Hertfordshire's four **FE Colleges** are central to the wider delivery landscape, providing a range of courses linked to digital skills. They are also part of the delivery machinery for **Digital Bootcamps** – which are short, intensive, skills programmes aimed at adults and funded by government. At the more advanced end of the spectrum, **University of Hertfordshire** offers a range of provision, including first and higher degrees in data science.

Challenges and priorities

The imperatives linked to digital adoption – as a route to innovation and potentially productivity enhancements – will grow rapidly over the lifetime of this **Digital Strategy**.

Over the next decade, the impact of AI is likely to be transformational – changing both jobs and businesses through automation of different forms. There are major risks – including job losses, business obsolescence, widening skills gaps, and cyber vulnerabilities. The agenda is huge and it will need to be navigated.

Actions

In advancing priorities linked to digital adoption, we will:

- support digital adoption across SMEs in Hertfordshire – through Hertfordshire Growth Hub, Made Smarter and other programmes, and through wider information and sign-posting
- explore the possibility of digital hubs, potentially linked to University of Hertfordshire, to provide SME access to data analytics and digital expertise
- encourage peer-to-peer networking, both within and between key sectors
- work with employers to understand changing digital skills needs and skills gaps
- support apprenticeships and other forms of provision in emerging digital fields
- develop local guidelines for responsible AI use and host public consultations to build trust and transparency, facilitating partnerships between local businesses and universities for AI research
- develop more intelligence, data analysis and horizon scanning on the potential

¹⁰ See [Employer+Perspectives,+Challenges+and+Opportunities+V2.pdf](#)

¹¹ See [Step2Skills](#)



impact of automation/AI and promote new thinking and practice

Through these and other interventions, by 2036, we aim to:

- effect significant productivity improvements within SMEs through the adoption of digital technologies
- address digital skills gaps and skills shortages of relevance to Hertfordshire's business community
- unlock the possibility of new growth sectors as a result of digital innovation, including through the effective use of AI.

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Ambition 4: Digital development

Building energy efficient data centre ecosystems as a critical national infrastructure and a route to sustainable economic growth locally.

Context

Data centres

In 2020, the UK's **National Data Strategy (NDS)** emphasised the importance of data centres and their clustering, which led – in 2024 – to the identification of data centres as a **Critical National Infrastructure**¹².

There are already several major data centre projects which are being advanced. Hertfordshire also has the capacity to respond further to the rising need from data centre operators to build and operate a new cluster of hyperscale data facilities serving the data demands from the financial services, creative media and ICT sectors in Hertfordshire and London. The presence of a 400kV electricity substation at Elstree and the surrounding highway network provides the opportunity to grow a substantial cluster of AI enabled centres in districts close to the M25 motorway.

Major projects which are at different stages of development include:

Waltham Cross, Broxbourne (approved). Capacity 100MW: Google's data centre in Waltham Cross is currently under construction on a 33-acre site that was purchased in October 2020. The project represents a significant investment of \$1 billion (£790 million) and aims to support Google's growing demand for AI and cloud services.

South Mimms, Hertsmere (approved). Capacity 320MW: The DC01 development in Hertsmere, known as DC01UK, is set to be one of the largest data centre campuses in Europe. Located on an

85-acre site near South Mimms, it will provide up to two million square feet of data centre floor space.

Abbots Langley, Three Rivers (approved). Capacity 96MW: The Greystoke development in Abbots Langley is a significant project involving the construction of a hyperscale data centre campus. This development will feature two buildings with a total of 84,000 square meters (904,170 square feet) of data centre space.

There is substantial evidence suggesting that data centres can play a key role in nurturing industry clusters. In principle, they can drive regional economic development by attracting significant capital investment and creating jobs. This economic boost can lead to improved infrastructure, such as better transportation networks and utilities, which may help further to 'crowd in' businesses.

Managing where data is stored and processed also strengthens resilience against geopolitical uncertainty, enabling clearer accountability for data handling and supporting ethical data use. In an era of cloud computing, a focus on data sovereignty will help to align innovation and growth with regulatory compliance, security, and long-term business sustainability.

However there are major challenges too. Data centres (and power-intensive AI models linked to them) are voracious consumers of energy¹³, water and land – and all three are in short supply. Data centres ought to be a source of competitive potential, but the challenges presented by them will need to be managed creatively.

¹² See [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

¹³ See Deloitte Insights: *As generative AI asks for more power, data centers seek more reliable,*

cleaner energy solutions [Data center sustainability | Deloitte insights](#)



Wider perspectives on development

Patterns of economic growth will evolve over the next decade. Data centres themselves are a catalyst for disruption, but as wider processes of digital transformation unfold, the physical form of development may well change. Large employment sites – dedicated to ‘monocultural’ employment uses – may become less significant; many have been lost over recent years and some remaining sites are being earmarked for distribution and/or data centre uses, sometimes as part of a wider mix.

In addition, there is scope for positive mixed-use development in Hertfordshire’s larger urban areas, particularly those with well located mainline railway stations. In this context, innovation districts could increasingly emerge, enabled by high quality digital infrastructures. Spatial and social boundaries between home and work will be blurred, and the consequential ‘melting pot’ of activity could itself accelerate innovation, productivity and economic growth.

At a larger spatial scale, innovation corridors present a different set of possibilities. These could link complementary local labour, property, investment and housing markets. The effect of distance is reduced by digital connectivity but it is not eliminated altogether, and innovation corridors could be a solution. Given its polycentricity – and its critical links to elsewhere (especially London, but also Cambridge and Milton Keynes) – corridor geographies may become increasingly important in effecting sustainable economic growth.

Challenges and priorities

For Hertfordshire, data centres are bringing both major opportunities and significant challenges. Importantly, they are creating a clear focus for developer interest, particularly in the south of the county. Other spatial development patterns are also changing – enabled, in part, by digital connectivity. Navigating appropriate solutions will be an overarching priority for the **Digital Strategy** and more generally.

Actions

In advancing priorities linked to digital development, we will:

- advance plans for a network of AI Growth Zones linked to data centres in Hertfordshire

- develop a development charter to frame a county-wide response to data centre enquiries, and to guide their progress through the planning system (including the negotiation of s106 agreements and possible incentives linked to green-powered facilities)
- explore opportunities to recycle waste heat and to use it within new developments across the county as part of a wider approach to the zoning of district heat networks
- actively encourage the use of high performance computing resources by Hertfordshire’s business community, recognising its significance as a critical infrastructure for innovation
- put in place innovation provision adjacent to major data centres – with co-working spaces and incubators
- develop a strategic approach to innovation districts and innovation corridors, and seek to reflect this in the forthcoming spatial development strategy
- actively promote Hertfordshire as a location for future international and national data centre investment – including through UKREiiF.

In terms of outcomes, by 2036, we will:

- develop a network of energy efficient data centres providing hubs within a wider innovation ecosystem
- position data centres within a strategic approach to sustainable energy across Hertfordshire, linked to the zoning of district heat networks
- secure significant data centre investment and lever wider benefits from it to effect positive change across Hertfordshire’s communities and businesses
- achieve a series of functioning innovation districts and innovation corridors underpinned by digital connectivity as a route to a sustained increase in productivity.



Delivering the Digital Strategy

As set out at the start, this **Digital Strategy** is underpinned by a decade or more of local experience in the design and delivery of digital programmes, frameworks and plans.

This has owed much to the work of Hertfordshire County Council, then-Hertfordshire LEP and Hertfordshire Growth Board – especially through its commitment to a clear digital mission.

Much has been achieved. However the digital ‘bar’ is rising very quickly, and this is occurring against a backdrop of significant institutional change (including the journey towards devolution and the reorganisation of local government across Hertfordshire).

Going forward, the **Digital Strategy** will be nested within the ambit of Hertfordshire’s new Economic Strategy 2026-36. The business-led Board of Hertfordshire Futures will therefore play a key role in overseeing its delivery, although the leader of Hertfordshire County Council will ultimately be responsible for it. At a more operational level, a new private-sector led Digital Sub-Board will be convened to support the work of both and to oversee progress on a regular basis.

Responsibility for delivery will in practice sit with a very wide range of stakeholders. Local and central government partners will have a key role to play, as will education providers and voluntary and community sector organisations.

Commercial and investment partners will also be critical – including Mobile Network Operators, Broadband Network Operators and data centre developers, amongst others.

Working across this array of stakeholders will be Digital Hertfordshire. It will ensure that the Ambitions in this Strategy are widely recognised and understood, and – where possible – it will take steps to ensure that programme monies are secured and harnessed to respond to key challenges that are beyond the ken of the market to address.

At the same time, as the ambit of ‘digital’ becomes ever broader and effectively cross-cutting, strong links will need to be made to wider strategic processes. These will include both the new Local Growth Plan and the emerging Spatial Development Strategy.

A series of key performance indicators will be put in place to monitor progress – and the Digital Sub-Board of Hertfordshire Futures will expect to receive regular reports in relation to them. These will relate both to operational measures and wider outcome indicators which are clearly aligned to the overall Vision.



Annex A: Glossary of Terms

Various technical terms and acronyms have been used throughout this document. Below we provide key definitions.

ADSL – Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line. Copper connection from the exchange to a property where the download speeds are higher than the upload speeds.

AI - Artificial Intelligence. Refers to systems or machines that mimic human intelligence to perform tasks and can iteratively improve themselves based on the information they collect.

Alt-nets (alternative network) – smaller broadband companies that either own their own broadband network or offer a broadband deal that isn't supplied by Openreach or Virgin Media.

Asymmetric Broadband - A connection with unequal download and upload speeds, e.g. 200Mbps download and 20Mbps upload. Often a cheaper product.

Coaxial – Broadband line traditionally used by Virgin Media that is not considered to be a Fibre product.

Cyber aware – Someone that is knowledgeable of cyber security, the threats posed, possible risks and able to utilise security best practices to guide their behaviour.

Data centre – A data centre is a physical location that stores computing machines and their related hardware equipment. It contains the computing infrastructure that IT systems require, such as servers, data storage drives, and network equipment.

DERI – Digital Exclusion Risk Index. Map indicating where digitally excluded populations are more likely to live.

Digital Champion – A digital champion is an individual, usually a volunteer, who promotes and shares their knowledge, skills and enthusiasm of digital technology with colleagues and / or people drawing on care and support.

FTTP/Full Fibre – Fibre to the Premises or Full Fibre is a type of broadband internet that uses fibre optic cables running from the exchange to the home/building. FTTP is also known as FTTH (Fibre to the Home).

FTTC – Fibre to the Cabinet. This setup uses fibre-optic cables running to a street cabinet. However, traditional copper cables then run from the cabinet to the building, with your speeds therefore varying depending on how far away the cabinet is located.

Gigabit – Broadband speeds of 1000Mbps/1Gbps. Often but not restricted to using Full Fibre technology.

Gigabit Capable Service – A broadband service available to a premises that could allow a package of 1000Mbps to be ordered/purchased. Despite 1gb being available, residents may **choose** a lower speed package for a potentially cheaper rate. They would still be considered as having access to a gigabit capable service, however.



IoT – Internet of Things. A system of interrelated computing devices, mechanical and digital machines, objects, animals or people that are provided with unique identifiers (UIDs) and the ability to transfer data over a network without requiring human-to-human or human-to-computer interaction.

IT – Information Technology is the equipment, software and organisation that manages it on behalf of an enterprise.

MDU (Multi dwelling unit) – a residential or commercial building containing multiple independent living units, designed to house several households or tenants within a single structure

MNO – Mobile Network Operator or provider. In the UK these are predominantly O2, EE, Vodafone and Three. All of the main MNOs sell mobile phone services directly, however there are additional virtual network operators (i.e. Tesco Mobile, giffgaff) that use one of the four MNOs networks to provide their own packages.

PSTN – Public Switched Telephone Network, switching of all analogue phone lines to digital.

Superfast – Broadband speeds of 30Mbps or higher, according to Ofcom. Early definitions of Superfast (including the Superfast programmes) defined it as 24Mbps and higher.

Symmetrical Broadband – A connection with equal download to upload speeds, e.g. 100Mbps download and upload. This can only be provided by certain full fibre connection.

Ultrafast – Broadband speeds of over 100Mbps. Often achieved using Full Fibre connectivity.

5G – Fifth Generation cellular wireless follows previous generations of mobile technology such as 3G and 4G. It provides higher download speeds and a faster user experience. It also offers greater capacity, allowing thousands of devices in a small area to be connected at the same time.

5G SA (Standalone) – offers a fully independent 5G network that operates without relying on existing 4G infrastructure.



