

The second phase of Levelling Up Together

Levelling up together 2

Final Report

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Upon publication of the UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper (2022), Gloucestershire County Council demonstrated its commitment to levelling up Gloucestershire Communities. The first phase of work centred around the Levelling Up Together Grant Scheme. More information about this scheme can be found [here](#).

In September 2023, the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities and the then Leader of the Council Cllr Mark Hawthorne MBE sought Cabinet approval to progress to a second stage of levelling up and sought further investment of £1,479,954 into projects and activities to support communities to 'level up' in Gloucestershire. This September 2023 decision paper can be found [here](#).

This decision enabled the allocation of £949,954 of Contain Outbreak Management Funding (COMF) to fund targeted interventions whose purpose was to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based. namely: digital inclusion, cost of living, online harms & vulnerable young people, and community transport.

As this work built on the first phase of levelling up work (the Levelling Up Together grant scheme, or 'LUT1') this piece of work is often referred to 'Levelling Up 2' (LUT2).

There were seven 'Levelling Up 2' Projects:

LUT2 Thematic area:	Digital Inclusion	Cost of Living	Online Harms (and Vulnerable Young People)	Community Transport
LUT2 Projects 1-7 (including allocation of funding):	1. GCC Digital Inclusion (£250,000)	2. Specialist Housing Capacity Project (provided by the county's two Citizens Advice Bureaus) (£99,954)	4. Young Gloucestershire's settings-based Online Harms project (£100,000)	7. The GCC Community Transport Minibus Replacement Fund (£200,000)
		3. An uplift to GCC's Care Leavers Fund (£50,000)	5. GCC Public Health Online Harms project (£150,000)	
			6. GCC A tier 2 alcohol development project (£100,000)	

An officer decision paper was published to enable two grant awards, one £100,000 grant to Young Gloucestershire (under the theme of Online Harms), and one £99,954 to North and West Gloucestershire Citizen's Advice Bureau (under the theme of Cost of Living). This December 2023 decision paper can be found [here](#).

The September 2023 Cabinet decision also enabled the top up of £530,000 of COMF funding to the Build Back Better Councillor grant scheme for the purposes of levelling up as part of the council's ambition to 'level up' Gloucestershire communities; giving an additional £10,000 to each County Councillor to spend in their division. Reporting for the Build Back Councillor Grant Scheme is undertaken routinely, and separately to the reporting of LUT2, which is covered below. More information about the Build Back Better Councillor grant scheme can be found [here](#).

This programme of work has now been completed, and some work will continue subject to funding. To find out more about any of these projects, please refer to the contact details for each project.

Theme: Digital Inclusion

Project 1:

Develop a Gloucestershire Digital Inclusion Strategy building on the findings of the Closing the Digital Divides Report (2022) and national reports. Recruit a Digital Inclusion Programme Manager and other support to create the foundations for a coordinated implementation plan for the county working across the system

Allocation: £250,000

This project began in GCC's Adults Directorate, namely the Adult Transformation Team and the Public Health and Communities Hub, which partnered with the national organisation, the Good Things Foundation, and many cross-sector stakeholders.

Several workshops were held to bring stakeholders together. Stakeholders' contributions and support in prioritising and mapping local assets and opportunities were invaluable. The Good Things Foundation summarised its findings in a report and presented an options appraisal to partners.

A top recommendation from 'Closing Digital Divides' report was to develop a vision, and the 'Minimum Digital Living Standard' got most votes from stakeholders (see below).

A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having **accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need**.
It is about being able to **communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence**.

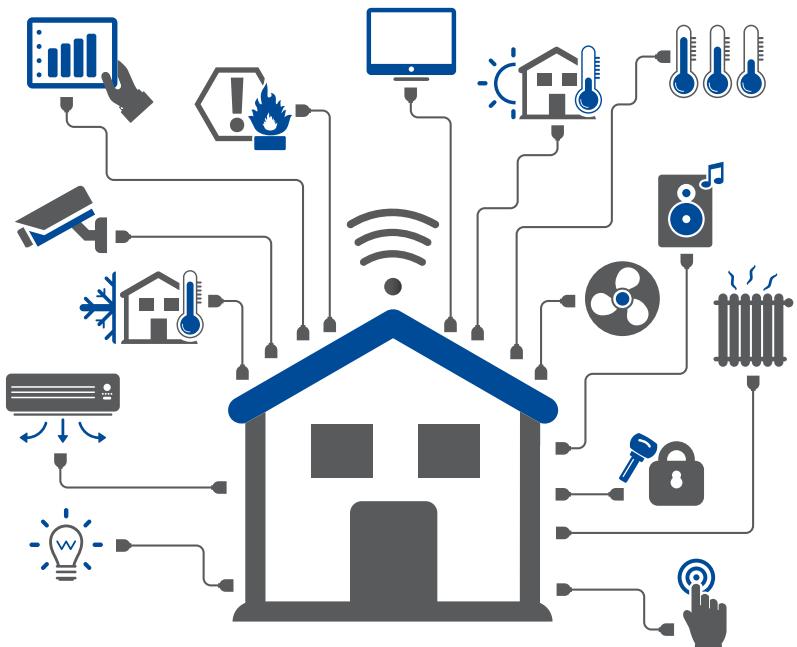


Fig 1. The minimum digital standard of living.

The workshops identified the following priorities:

- Strong support for a county-wide cross-sector network
- Strong support to develop a strategy, and invest in the VCSE sector
- Everyone valued the chance to network across different sectors
- Benefit of local expertise, existing networks, learning from others
- Opportunities to draw on local, county, and out-of-county resources.



Digital Inclusion moves to the Environment, Economy, and Infrastructure (EE&I) Directorate

In the summer of 2024, it was agreed that the Digital Inclusion work would be transferred from the Adult Transformation Team to the Economy and Strategic Planning Team, which is part of GCC's Environment, Economy, and Infrastructure (EE&I) Directorate. Since 2011, the Economy and Strategic Planning Team has led the Fastershire initiative, which has played a central role in delivering over 98.51% superfast (>30 Mbps) and 81.13% ultrafast (>100 Mbps) broadband coverage across Gloucestershire.

In the autumn of 2024, the recruitment process began for the Principal Digital Infrastructure Officer and Principal Digital Inclusion Officer positions within the Economy and Strategic Planning Team. Both postholders began their work in January 2025.

The Principal Digital Infrastructure Officer is leading GCC's efforts to continue the rollout of ultrafast broadband and advanced wireless coverage across the county. They work directly with Building Digital UK on the ongoing gigabit contracts in the [Forest of Dean](#) and [East Gloucestershire](#).

Both officers are now leading the creation of a new Gloucestershire Digital Inclusion and Infrastructure Strategy, which is planned to be approved at Cabinet on **22nd October 2025**.

Building on The Good Things Foundation: Options for a Countywide Approach to Digital Inclusion in Gloucestershire

The Principal Digital Inclusion Officer has met with the Good Things Foundation and has begun implementing the reports' priorities and building on the existing work done to date. Priorities include establishing a countywide Digital Inclusion Strategic Advisory Group to help steer and ensure stakeholder engagement in the new Digital Inclusion Strategy. This strategy will likely develop a plan that invests in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and Gloucestershire Libraries to enable a neighbourhood-level approach with consistent standards, targeting gaps in digital inclusion provision across Gloucestershire.

Management of Ongoing Digital Inclusion Initiatives

Alongside the development of the new strategy, the Principal Digital Inclusion Office is managing the existing DigiHubs contract with the Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF) and a new contract with FVAF to deliver a range of innovative projects aimed at increasing digital inclusion efforts across Gloucestershire. This will include extra support for training digital champion volunteers, expanding DigiHub provisions in underserved areas, providing access to digital devices, and implementing marketing strategies to raise awareness of all the activities across the county. Work is also underway on Get Online Gloucestershire, a new digital tool finder website listing all digital inclusion activities across Gloucestershire.

Cabinet Agreement

Once agreed upon, the Digital Inclusion Strategy will be incorporated into a Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy, which is planned for formal release through a cabinet report in October 2025.

With the recruitment of new digital roles and a strategy in place, the Council will be well-positioned to continue developing digital initiatives, ensuring that infrastructure and inclusion priorities are at the heart of council policy.

For more information please visit:

www.goucestershire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/grow-goucestershire/digital-Gloucestershire
or email: digital.connectivity@goucestershire.gov.uk

Theme: Cost of Living

Project 2:

**Top up the Care Leavers Fund and extend support to 16-17 years olds
(it is currently 18+)**

Allocation: £50,000

GCC's Children's Directorate has used the LUT2 funding to support care leavers aged 18 – 25 years old who are moving to their own independent accommodation. To be eligible for this support the care leaver would be Former Relevant so would have spent 13 weeks in care after the age of 14 with at least 1 day aged 16 or 17 years old.

Support for care leavers from the LUT2 funding has been overseen by the Care Leavers Panel which meets weekly. The support offered includes contributions towards essential household goods, the provision of broadband and support with driving lessons when linked to employment.

The funding allowed the panel to increase the amount of financial support for care leavers with the costs of Broadband and Driving Lessons, the panel were also able to support care leavers who had left care before 1st April 2023 who were only able to access a grant of £2,000 towards the costs of setting up their new home, care leavers who left care after this date were able to access a grant of £3,000. This enabled the panel to provide additional support where needed to a group of care leavers who due to the date they left care received less financial support.

The panel have many examples of how care leavers have been supported linked to purchasing essential white goods, flooring and other essential items. An example of how the support has made a difference for a care leaver aged 21 years old who had a child and was living out of area, due to breakdown of her relationship she returned to Gloucestershire with her child but was unable to bring any of her belongings other than clothing and some of the child's belongings. We were able to assist the care leaver to purchase cooker, fridge-freezer, washing machine as well as other essential items that were needed to set up her new home with her daughter.

For more information about this project, please contact: Careleaversoffer@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Project 3:

Fund specialist housing and welfare paid capacity to advise and support residents with issues related to cost of living county-wide (including debt, welfare benefits, housing, switching to online Universal credit and energy advice)

Allocation: £99,954

The Levelling Up funding provided Citizens Advice in Gloucestershire with support for Housing and Housing related debt. This provided funding for two full time caseworkers who were situated at both Citizens Advice in the County. These two posts enabled the Citizens Advice in Gloucestershire to double the number of staff members who could support on housing related issues from 2 to 4 colleagues. This additional resource, although struggling to meet demand, meant that more people were able to receive more in-depth support. Each caseworker supports between 200 and 250 clients each during the period of a year.

During the year from April 2025:

- 1,590 clients were supported with housing on 4,571 issues
- 500 of these clients approached Citizens Advice regarding rent arrears, 673 with council tax arrears and 723 had energy debts
- 368 clients were assisted with Homelessness support
- 277 clients were assisted with access to and the provision of accommodation
- 438 clients were assisted with issues relating to local authority or housing association property
- 486 were assisted with issues related to private rented accommodation 376 clients were assisted with other housing related issues
- 113 clients were assisted with owner occupier related issues including 68 clients with problems with leaseholds and 32 with mortgage arrears.

Case Study

"Client is single person living in local authority accommodation. She presented with debt issues with council tax arrears, rent arrears, utility arrears and some non-priority debt. The client did not have hot water or heating for at least 6 months as an appointment in the summer with local authority maintenance team was cancelled and not rebooked until Citizens Advice contacted them. The client had contacted the maintenance team herself but to no avail.

As a result of the failure of the heating system to work the client had to use electric heaters and her energy bills had increased significantly as a result.

Outcomes achieved for the client:

We contacted the local authority maintenance team and ensured the clients situation progressed and heating system issues resolved. A charitable application was made for the client, and she received an energy grant of £300 towards energy costs.

We negotiated with the client's landlord regarding rent arrears and to help clear her other debts a Debt Relief Order (DRO) was applied for, enabling the client's situation to be stabilised. Once the DRO application was submitted the client had no energy arrears and the HSF grant meant she was in credit with her supplier.

The client felt well supported and relieved as her rent arrears were managed which meant her home was secured and the client no longer feared heating her home."

Theme: Online Harms and Vulnerable Young People

Project 4:

Fund a campaign of work to raise awareness of, and tackle, modern harms

Allocation: £150,000

The LUT2 funded work focusing on preventing online harms to vulnerable young people included the following:

- Partnership with the University of Bristol to fund a research project testing the concept of therapeutic journalling to support young people experiencing poor mental health as a result of online harms. The toolkit will be trialled by our School Nursing Service, with the Cotswold team using it in their consultations in secondary schools
- Establishment of an Online Harms Parent Portal webpage to give parents and carers basic information about different aspects of online harms and links to reputable sources of support and further information.

If you are interested in finding out more about this work, please contact publichealth@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Project 5:

Fund a project to be delivered in schools and community settings to raise awareness of online harms amongst children and young people – Grant Award to Young Gloucestershire

Allocation: £100,000

Young Gloucestershire was awarded £100,000 to provide one-to-one support for young people identified as being high risk due to experiencing online harms such as bullying, grooming, harassment and exploitation. Young Gloucestershire have also piloted small group support to young people and held awareness-raising sessions and workshops in schools, post-16 education provision and community groups. Below is an update provided by Young Gloucestershire.

"Young Gloucestershire's Online Harms programme works with young people aged 11 - 18 who have experienced harm online, either as a victim, perpetrator, or sometimes a mixture of both. We covered topics such as cyberbullying, sexting/sending nudes, online grooming, harassment, hate speech, privacy, gambling, and the mental health impacts of all of these.

We take a youth work mentoring approach, meeting the young people to understand their needs in this area and working with them to help them put in place strategies to understand online harms and keep themselves safe. This is key, as we often find young people are more at risk of online harms if there are other linked issues (the average score was 3.3, with 35 having a score of 4+). For example, a young person with low self-esteem may be sending nude images in order to gain validation, so we might work with them to build this self-esteem in other healthier ways.

We approach the work in three ways: working individually with young people over a series of 12 weeks; going into schools to work with small groups of young people over 6 weekly sessions; going into schools to deliver awareness sessions to groups of up to 30 young people. However, we've found that we had the most success with our 1-1 sessions while groups were more challenging. Schools were keen to have us deliver awareness sessions, and we had good success with this- however we struggled to progress as many groups as we'd hoped.

We have supported a varied age range, but our largest group was group was 14-15, with 56 young people out of the 137 total in this age range. We use the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale to measure the wellbeing of the young people we work with, and on average through attending the programme we've seen this score increase from 44 before working with us, to 48 afterwards. This shows we are having a positive impact on the wellbeing of young people through this programme.

Moving forward, we are looking to tweak the name of the programme and our approach in order to work with more young people. Calling it "Online Harms" has connotations of being punished or judged, and we've found that young people have been reluctant to attend these sessions as a result. We'd like to advertise the programme as a mentoring programme first and foremost, and approach online issues through this approach. We'd also like to refocus mainly on the 1-1 work."

Case Study

"Our young person was referred to Young Gloucestershire as there were concerns of being vulnerable to exploitation after previous referrals to social services. There were also concerns over his behaviour online, that he may be sending sexual videos and images of himself to others. Initially, he was reluctant to engage in the sessions and wasn't sure if he wanted to complete them. However, once he gave them a try he quickly managed to build a good relationship with the youth worker and participated well throughout the remaining sessions.

The sessions began by exploring his understanding of online harms, where he spoke about being bullied in the past and having images shared of himself online. With his youth worker he worked through these issues, learning how he can keep himself safe going forward and discussing all of the feelings this brought up. They covered topics such as online harassment, social media, online gambling and the mental health impacts of online harms.

Working through these issues lead to discussions around our young person's learning to manage his emotions and talking through how these online issues affected him, and with his youth worker he started working on various techniques to help himself with this.

He found coping mechanisms to manage his feelings, including writing poetry. Towards the end of the sessions, our young person became more self-aware, taking time to reflect and being open with others (such as his mum). He expressed that the sessions have been really helpful, he felt supported and that he has a much better understanding of how to stay safe online.

He is going on to complete his GCSEs this year, and while is still anxious around this has said he feels more confident about approaching the future in general. We also received some wonderful feedback from their mum, expressing her gratitude for YG and the programme, that the youth worker's "help, support, advice and efforts" had motivated their child and thanked her for everything she had done."

For more information about this project, please contact: getinvolved@youngglos.org.uk

Project 6: **Drug and Alcohol Tier 2 Development Work**

Allocation: £100,000

Gloucestershire County Council commissioned Young Gloucestershire, Catch-22 and Gloucestershire Young Carers to assess Tier 2 drug and alcohol needs among Gloucestershire's children and young people. The assessment aimed to identify the current need for Tier 2 services, map areas with prevalent young people's substance use, and gather evidence to inform the development of targeted services.

Tier 2 refers to open-access drug treatment (such as drop-in services) and harm reduction that does not always need a care plan. Tier 2 covers things like triage assessment, advice and information and harm reduction given by specialist drug treatment services. open access services and harm reduction.

Substance misuse interventions for young people tend to be categorised as universal (typically education and communication programmes), targeted (including early intervention for at-risk groups such as young offenders or looked after children), and specialist (for those who have already developed drug or alcohol misuse and who require a care-planned structured package of support).

The needs assessments used qualitative and quantitative methods, including consultations with professionals, children and young people, parents, carers, and local services, complemented by desk research, instruction of an independent organisation outside of Gloucestershire (Catch-22), instruction of an organisation already working within Gloucestershire (Young Gloucestershire) and residential workshops with young people from different cohorts (youth justice, young carers and care experienced young people).

Whilst there has been an overall improvement in young people's wellbeing and a decline in the number trying substances, those who do engage in substance use are increasingly vulnerable. Children and young people are reporting using substances due to socialised norms, peer pressure, stress, anxiety, and boredom. CYP, parents/carers, and professionals identified several barriers to accessing support, including a lack of awareness of services, fear of stigma, and concerns about the consequences of seeking help.

A need for increased promotion and visibility of existing services was identified, as many CYP are unaware of the support available to them. Existing services are often not perceived as accessible or youth-friendly, with many CYP preferring to confide in friends or family rather than seeking professional help. Several recommendations were made in the summary report:

Increase Targeted Early Intervention Outreach:

- Develop easily accessible one-on-one support services, prioritizing outreach in schools, youth clubs, and other community settings
- Expand Early Support: Strengthen early intervention services for young people with emerging substance misuse needs
- Target High-Risk Groups: Focus early interventions on vulnerable groups with higher substance misuse risks.

Enhance Substance Use Education:

- Expand education inside and outside of schools to cover topics such as peer pressure, safe use of social media, mental health, the effects of drugs and alcohol, and harm reduction strategies
- Update educational content to include harm reduction, what to do if you are worried about someone using substances and new substance trends.

Develop and Expand Workforce Training:

- Implement training programs across all sectors to ensure that professionals can provide low-level interventions and appropriate referrals for substance misuse
- Professional Training: Provide drug and alcohol training for professionals to recognise and respond to substance misuse, including parental substance use.

Promote Youth-Friendly Services:

- Youth-Friendly Services: Ensure that services are flexible, non-judgmental, and approachable, offering both short-term support and the option for group work where appropriate.

Utilize Social Media for Engagement:

- Leverage social media platforms to provide drug-related education and information, focusing on both prevention and harm reduction.

Create Clear Referral Pathways:

- Develop and publicize referral pathways from schools, social care, and early help services to ensure early intervention for substance use concerns
- Create clear pathways from local services to early support for substance misuse concerns.

Increase Diversionary Activities:

- Expand access to positive activities, particularly in rural areas, to prevent substance use and encourage healthier lifestyle choices.

Develop Parental Resources:

- Create resources and training programs to support parents and carers in addressing and responding to their child's substance use
- Parental resources: Develop resources or training for parents and carers supporting or responding to their child's substance use.

The Combating Drugs Partnership Children and Young People subgroup will consider the report and recommendations and agree further actions.

If you are interested in finding out more about this project, please contact
publichealth@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Theme: Community Transport and Access to Services

Project 7:

Fund a vehicle replacement scheme for community transport; to match fund the upgrading of community transport vehicles to enhance modernisation, accessibility, and efficiency

Allocation: £200,000

Investing and supporting Community Transport in Gloucestershire ensures people can make journeys not provided by public transport. It continues a long-established sense of belonging; it removes barriers to travel and empowers individuals to access services. This targeted intervention has allowed a single investment to benefit different communities in semi-rural and rural locations, in locations that need this transport, across geographical or political boundaries. The widening of the groups' operations has higher economic value, realistically increasing the sustainability of this transport and of the onward travel options available. Thus, this project is perfectly in line with our wider transport policies and obligations, including those within the Local Transport Plan and the Bus Service Improvement Plan.

The outcomes of the funding:

The CT teams have updated their fleet with new purchased/leased vehicles, including facilitating match funding. Ideal vehicles have been purchased, including prioritising comfort and wheelchair access. These are the longest established CT in the county and as such are still operating in different areas despite rising transport costs across the industry. These vehicles will decrease repair and servicing costs and comply with all the latest fuel efficiency and emission regulations. This reduces fuel bills while also reducing carbon footprint.

- Cotswolds Friends:** £36,000. Sold an off-the-road minibus (faulty, no wheelchair access) and use both LUT2 funds and sale funds for new vehicle with wheelchair access. The minibus is proving itself invaluable to the charity, clients, volunteers, and the local community. It is very low cost to users
- Community Connexions:** £93,120. Replace four leased minibuses for two years, and then the organisation to match fund for two years. Vehicles used for any use across the charity as needed day to day, and are considerably lighter weight than the four being retired
- Newent Association for the Disabled:** £60,000, to cover 90% of the cost for a single brand new purpose built wheelchair access minibus. Match funding offer to provide the additional 10% needed, and commit another £60,000 to two second hand vehicles
- Lydney Dial a Ride:** £60,000 to cover 85% of a single new vehicle, where LDAR would pay for the remainder.

More people, with varying needs and destinations, have travelled more comfortably and more safely, with drivers and operators obtaining a more resilient and appropriately modern fleet.

For further information on this project please contact: public.transport@gloucestershire.gov.uk



Closing comments

The Levelling Up 2 programme has funded a diverse array of projects as part of a thematic approach (in contrast to the first phase, which was geographically based).

Thank you to all internal and external partners mentioned and involved in the report for their commitment to delivering on their projects, their contributions and commitment to partnership working have been instrumental in providing vital support and creating opportunities to reduce inequalities for Gloucestershire residents.

This programme of work has now finished, although some of the specific projects will continue subject to funding. To find out more about any of the information in this report, please refer to the contact details for each project.