



**BUSINESS**



**Tech with social purpose**

**TACKLING DIGITAL  
INEQUALITY IN  
GREATER MANCHESTER**

## Our mission: help make Greater Manchester an even better place to call home

Nobody should be left behind on the digital transformation journey. And we're committed to making sure they're not.

Our longstanding relationship with Greater Manchester is proof of that.

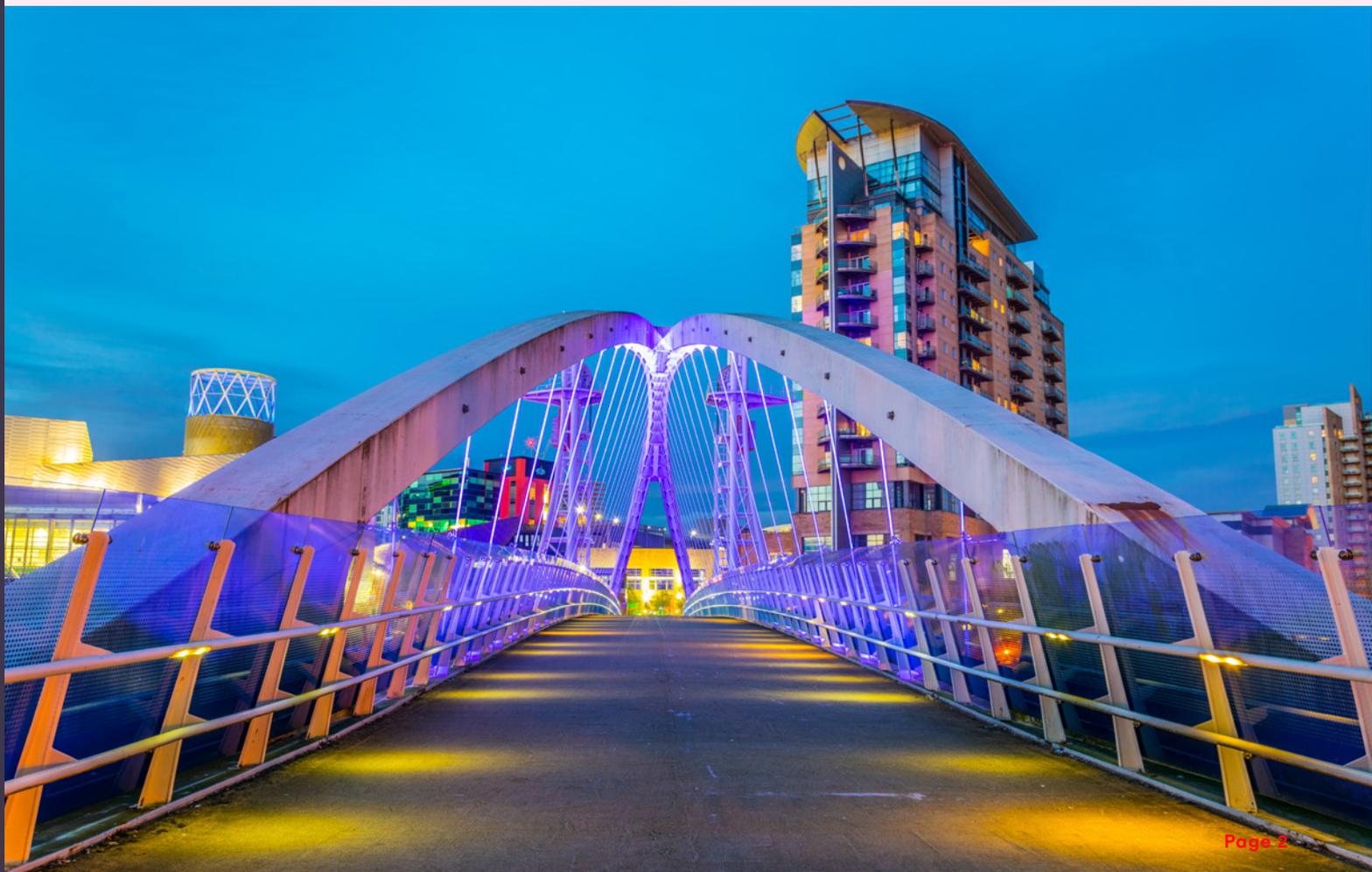
In 2019 we rolled out our gigabit home broadband service throughout the city, giving around half a million homes access to hyper-fast broadband services.

Since then we've extended our network advancements to bring enhanced connectivity to more than 1,500 public sites across Greater Manchester, laying over 2,000 kilometres of new fibre optic cables in the process and enhancing its position as a leading European digital city-region.

This is all part of our commitment to deliver part of the UK's largest Local Full Fibre Networks Programme (LFFN), a government-backed scheme designed to give more people and organisations access to the connectivity they need to thrive.

Our most recent study with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) found that continued investment in digital change projects could increase UK GDP by £236bn, or 6.5%, by 2040.

This is directly helping people and businesses to succeed, driving economic growth, creating jobs and improving the daily lives of everyone in the area.





Yet while this is a brilliant opportunity for the UK, it's important that everyone can benefit from this growth. The benefits of digital change will only be a true success if they are accessible for everyone.

From transport and economic growth to skills, education and healthcare, investment in fast, reliable connectivity is at the heart of public sector transformation across the UK.

And a crucial element of this partnership is our commitment to deliver social value to Greater Manchester (i.e. tech investment that has a positive impact on its people, organisations and environment).

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)'s Digital Blueprint and Strategy was instrumental in shaping the technology we provide and our social value commitments to this project and our wider public sector customers.

Together we are making sure that every metre of cable laid and every hour spent is directly and positively impacting the lives of people who live and work in Manchester.

The success of this programme so far and the ambitious plans we have for the future hinges on our close relationship with GMCA. Throughout this partnership we have been able to ensure that the value of the connectivity we provide goes far beyond the infrastructure itself.

In this report we will explore how our work with GMCA is setting the bar for future social value projects at a local and national level.

By working in true partnership with local authorities, businesses and other stakeholder groups, it is possible to revolutionise the everyday for public sector organisations and the citizens they serve.



**Jo Bertram, Managing Director,  
Virgin Media O2 Business**

## Pioneering a new way of working for GMCA, our local authorities and Virgin Media Business

In Greater Manchester, we have a £5 billion digital ecosystem and we're putting people at the heart of our digital ambitions. We are well known for doing things differently and collaboration is integral to what we do.

In March 2020, Greater Manchester secured world-class digital infrastructure through the biggest government full-fibre investment in the UK. On behalf of our 10 local authorities, GMCA appointed Virgin Media Business to deliver up to 2,700km of new fibre optic broadband infrastructure across the region connecting more than 1,500 public sites throughout Greater Manchester.

The LFFN programme focusses on collaboration and creating services designed to serve the majority, as well as our future generations. Securing the right infrastructure, that not only considers where we are now, but where we will be in 30 years' time is vital.

The deal was the result of close partnership working between GMCA, Greater Manchester's local authorities, Fire & Rescue Services and Transport for Greater Manchester and is backed by millions of pounds of funding from central government.

This report, exploring and highlighting the impact of the social value programme, comes at a pivotal time in Greater Manchester's digital ambitions. Ambitions that put our residents at the heart of our plans as we work towards our objective of becoming recognised as a world leading digital city-region.

This programme has brought local and central government together for a common goal, supercharging our digital capacity and helping our public sector sites to continue delivering the best possible services to local residents.



**Andy Burnham,**  
Mayor of Greater Manchester

up to  
**2,700km**  
of new fibre optic  
broadband infrastructure  
across the region  
connecting more than  
  
**1,500**  
public sites throughout  
Greater Manchester



Early learning from the programme has led to the creation of the Greater Manchester Social Value Framework. The framework sets out several opportunities across the city region where businesses can help address the needs of Greater Manchester’s people – pioneering a new way of working for GMCA, our local authorities and Virgin Media Business.

And despite the challenges of Covid-19, including a need to refine the programme’s social value plan to better reflect an everchanging position across the region, this report shows significant progress has been made.

Launching the Greater Manchester Technology Fund in March 2020 is just one notable achievement – in response to the first lockdown, the fund was created to support young learners facing digital isolation with the technology and connectivity needed to continue their learning at home. A generous donation from Virgin Media Business helped the fund reach as many young people across the region as possible. Since the fund launched, it has supported over 3,527 young people.

And as of July 2021, work has progressed to connect several sites accessed by our people, such as community centres and temporary accommodation schemes, across the city-region with free broadband, another initiative led by Virgin Media Business at the benefit of our people. This, along with Virgin Media Business teams volunteering to support people across Greater Manchester, has shown the value of social value commitments in programmes of this kind.

A collective vision and cooperation are key to strengthening our communities and ensuring our residents in Greater Manchester benefit through our digital ambitions.



**Greater Manchester  
Technology Fund has  
supported over  
3,527  
young people**



**BUSINESS**



## Chapter 1

# Our commitments to Greater Manchester's citizens

“We are going to help improve communities across the UK with world-class infrastructure and our £23 million investment in Greater Manchester will give hundreds of public buildings the fastest broadband available. This will bring huge social benefits and attract further commercial funding to boost the region’s £3 billion digital sector.”

**Matt Warman MP,  
Minister for Digital Infrastructure**



## 1 Improving digital skills

- Creating at least 50 new apprenticeships over the next 10 years
- Funding four digital skills programmes with the Prince's Trust and GMCA
- Meeting a local employment target of 50%



## 2 Tackling homelessness

- Donating £100,000 to the Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity to support the *A Bed Every Night* programme
- Setting up a mixture of homeless shelters, charities and community centres with free connectivity for five years

## 3 Empowering citizens

- Giving 567 school children digital kit bundles to support digital inclusion and home working
- Providing seven schools with professional consultancy to improve their digital services



## 4 Helping the community

- Providing 5,000 employee volunteering hours over the next five years to support community resilience
- Supplying two 10Gb managed internet circuits to be used by GM LFFN contracting authorities, enabling better public sector collaboration

The ongoing partnership between Virgin Media Business and GMCA to deliver the LFFN Programme is the largest of its kind in the UK. Our work with GMCA will underpin a wide range of digital transformation and smart city projects aimed at improving the lives of those who live in Greater Manchester.

In its first year alone the project has delivered £11.8 million of economic benefit to the region through the programme's commitment to local employment.

Together we're installing up to 2,700km of new fibre optic broadband infrastructure to connect more than 1,500 public sites across the city-region, bringing greater connectivity to people in the area. We will be upgrading the connectivity of several sites in Salford and Manchester and a further 36 public sites through the Tameside Cooperative.

These changes will help Greater Manchester achieve its ambition of becoming a leading European digital city region and making it 'one of the best places in the world to grow up, get on and grow old'.

In its first year alone the project has delivered **£11.8 million** of economic benefit to the region



## A powerful partnership to bring social benefits to Greater Manchester

“This investment in future-proof connectivity is enabling residents and businesses across the region to benefit from new digital services, better employment opportunities, and a more integrated and efficient public sector which is transforming lives.”

**Martin McFadyen,**  
**Head of Public Sector at Virgin Media Business**

We're helping GMCA achieve its ambitious goals set out in Greater Manchester's social value framework – ‘Build Back Better’ – and the Greater Manchester Digital Blueprint and Strategy. By providing better foundations for digital public services, removing social and economic barriers and creating opportunities for wider connectivity, the LFFN Programme will create employment and support for the people who need it.



## Fulfilling the Greater Manchester Digital Blueprint

“Here in Greater Manchester, we remain committed to being a digital city-region with a difference, putting people at the heart of what we do. We want our people to be empowered by the opportunity digital brings whatever their age, location or situation, and we want our partners to work with us to achieve our digital ambitions - which is why social value commitments such as those made by Virgin Media Business are integral to helping us achieve the ambitions set in our Digital Blueprint.”

**Councillor Andrew Western, GMCA Lead for Digital, Work and Skills**

Covid-19 has highlighted the growing issue of digital exclusion in our society.

In Greater Manchester as many as 1.2 million residents could be in some way digitally excluded.

In February 2020 GMCA launched The Greater Manchester Digital Blueprint to change this, with several priorities:

1. **Empowering people** – to ensure that everyone in Greater Manchester, whatever their age, location or situation, can benefit from the opportunities digital brings.
2. **Innovative public services** – to apply exemplary digital ideas and practice to delivering public services in Greater Manchester, linking innovative business, academic and public sector thinking with the needs of Greater Manchester’s people.
3. **Digitally enabling businesses** – businesses of all sizes should have the means and skills to digitise their business and make the most of the opportunities that brings.
4. **Creating and scaling digital businesses** – encouraging and supporting businesses to start, grow or move to Greater Manchester, recognising the importance of the continued expansion of digital, creative and tech sector and the opportunities this brings for the people of Greater Manchester.
5. **Global digital influencer** – Greater Manchester is taking its position as an internationally recognised centre of digital innovation, research and practice.
6. **Digital talent pipeline** – to create a critical mass of digital talent, positioning Greater Manchester as the key place for businesses seeking a digitally-skilled workforce to invest in outside of London.
7. **Digital infrastructure** – to ensure that Greater Manchester has the digital infrastructure it needs to be a world class digital city region.

Through the social value work within the LFFN Programme we’re working with GMCA to make the area a 100% digitally-enabled city region. By offering digital skills programmes, free consultations to schools across the area to improve their digital service provision and equipping students with digital kit bundles, we are directly supporting GMCA’s ambition to make Greater Manchester a world leader in digital.

The social value work aims to tackle issues such as digital exclusion – a key focus on the Greater Manchester Digital Blueprint – by giving people the tools and skills with which to get online and empower themselves to be more connected and better informed.

“I believe the impact of this programme has been transformative in two ways. Firstly, because of its direct impact through the work that has been undertaken on the ground in helping to change lives. But, just as importantly, it has strongly influenced our strategic thinking about social value by demonstrating what is possible when the public and private sectors work towards the same goals.”

**John Steward,**  
Digital Infrastructure Lead at GMCA

## Helping Greater Manchester ‘Build Back Better’

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis GMCA is committed to using social value to tackle inequality in Greater Manchester. It encourages every organisation in the region to carry out its business in a way that creates lasting benefits for the people in the area, improves the local economy and positively contributes to the environment.

The ‘Build Back Better’ framework is built around six key priorities:

- 

**1 Provide the best employment that you can.**
- 

**2 Keep the clean air in Greater Manchester.**
- 

**3 Create the employment and skills opportunities that we need to ‘Build Back Better’.**
- 

**4 Be part of a strong local community.**
- 

**5 Make your organisation greener.**
- 

**6 Develop a local, GM-based and resilient supply chain.**

The LFFN Programme has already made great progress in supporting these priorities. The project has exceeded its local employment targets, with more than 80% of the workforce based in Greater Manchester.

We're also carrying out volunteering work within local communities to make a difference to those who live in them and create connections that go beyond the digital world. The social value goals agreed with GMCA will make significant progress towards the goals set out in the 'Build Back Better' framework – something that we will explore more later in this report.

## Our People, Our Place

Several of the social value goals of the LFFN Programme are aimed at supporting young people to develop their skills and employability.

This is a direct response to GMCA's 'Our People, Our Place' strategy, founded on the ambition to make Greater Manchester one of the best places in the world to grow up, get on and grow old. It covers health, wellbeing, work and jobs, housing, transport, skills, training and economic growth.





**BUSINESS**



## **Chapter 2**

**What we've  
achieved so far  
and our next steps**

“Through bold investments in social value initiatives that support Greater Manchester’s Digital Blueprint, we are seeing real benefit to our people including through the Greater Manchester Technology Fund, community volunteering and through supporting Greater Manchester wide priorities including homelessness and digital inclusion.”

**Councillor Andrew Western,  
GMCA Lead for Digital, Work and Skills**



## 1 Improving digital skills

- 27 new apprentices across a variety of roles, including field technician, fibre engineer, project management and telesale roles, since March 2020
- Funded four digital skills programmes with the Prince's Trust and GMCA, supporting a total of 28 young people
- Over Y1 of project rollout, achieved an average local employment rate of 75%



## 2 Tackling homelessness

- Donated £100,000 to the Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity to support the *A Bed Every Night* programme
- Set up 15 out of 21 homeless shelters, community centres and charities with free connectivity for five years

## 3 Empowering citizens

- Helped GMCA provide 567 school children with digital kit bundles to support digital inclusion and home working



## 4 Helping the community

- More than 1000 volunteering hours delivered in 2021 to support community resilience

## Supporting The Digital Talent Pipeline

Inequality has been an issue in Greater Manchester for a long time.

One in four children living in the area now live in poverty (26%) and 36,700 people over the age of 16 (5%) are unemployed – one of the highest proportions in the country.

With the North West being hit particularly badly by Covid-19, the pandemic threatens to exacerbate existing socio-economic problems even further, potentially widening inequality and limiting the life chances of local residents.

Within its Greater Manchester Social Value Framework, GMCA has identified a number of strategic priorities that will be key to rebuilding the region's economy and society following Covid-19, with creating skills and providing the best employment possible being seen as two of the most essential components for levelling up society and ensuring equal opportunities for all.

**1 in 4**  
children living in the  
area now live in poverty

**36,700**  
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the country

## Providing the best employment you can

Greater Manchester should be a place where people can fulfil their ambitions. That means making it a place where people want to live and work.

While employment growth has been strong over recent years, too many Greater Manchester residents are in low paid and insecure roles, with little opportunity to progress.

With the pandemic only highlighting these issues further, providing world class employment opportunities will be vital for reducing poverty and giving young people the confidence they need to succeed.

Creating employment and skills opportunities to Build Back Better

As we all learn to live and work in a post-Covid economy, Greater Manchester needs to ensure an appropriately skilled workforce is available locally to meet immediate and emerging needs and that the talent pipeline is in place to future-proof jobs, businesses and workers.

There is a huge opportunity to inspire the region's young people to learn about their future career prospects and help them to understand the breadth of opportunities available to them, regardless of their background or current circumstances.

As a key strategic partner for GMCA we've already taken great strides to support local employment and equip youngsters with the digital skills they need to thrive.

Below are two live examples of how Virgin Media Business's LFFN programme is delivering social value for Greater Manchester and its citizens through investment in skills and apprenticeships.

## Spotlight: Equipping Greater Manchester's young people with digital skills

“The Prince’s Trust really gave me a confidence boost and encouraged me to be creative in ways and avenues that I previously hadn’t considered. I really enjoyed this course and can’t begin to explain the amount of anxiety it relieved.”

**Young person supported through a programme part-funded by Virgin Media Business**

43% of young people supported by The Prince’s Trust in Greater Manchester are not in education, employment or training.

It’s statistics like this that led the youth charity to partner with GMCA in January 2020 to help close the skills gap by empowering local young people to realise their true potential.

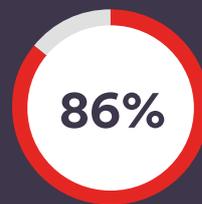
Through the multi-million pound government-backed Future Workforce Fund, the partnership aims to support children to secure the skills and experience they need for later life. This will be particularly important for youngsters who have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19.

Between October 2020 and March 2021, Virgin Media Business funding helped deliver three dynamic ‘Get Started’ programmes, supporting a total of 28 young people in Greater Manchester.

With topics ranging from theatre studies to digital skills, each five-day programme enabled the youngsters to hear from industry experts, learn transferable skills and gain vital sector understanding to better equip them to fulfil their potential and succeed in a professional environment.



**86% said they feel more or much more prepared for a career in the digital sector**



**86% said the course enabled them to be confident or thoroughly confident in using new skills**

Following the initial success of the ‘Get Started’ programme we’ll be supporting The Prince’s Trust and GMCA to run similar programmes throughout 2021, including Get Started in Tech and a special Digital and Tech Festival with Ada.

## Spotlight: Local employment and apprenticeships



**LFFN programme  
local employment  
target of 50%**



**More than 80%  
Local employment rate  
after year one of project**

Alongside our local employment targets we've committed to providing 50 apprenticeships over 10 years in Greater Manchester.

Since March 2020, we've hired 27 new Greater Manchester based apprentices, far exceeding our year-on-year commitment.

Our Apprenticeship Team runs the scheme, which is available regardless of age, experience or background and offers the chance to train, retrain or upskill. Several apprentices have already completed their training and are now moving into full-time roles across Virgin Media.

### Ewan Roach

Completed his L3 Civil Engineering apprenticeship in December 2020 and is now working as a Principal Delivery Engineer

"No two days are the same, it makes you grow up – there's a lot of responsibility and people you need to network with. It builds your confidence."

### Samuel Chilvers

Completed an L4 Associate Project Manager apprenticeship this year and is now working full time as a Junior Project Manager

"With an apprenticeship, you're earning as you're learning. I've learned loads about the day-to-day life of being in business and it's given me transferrable skills from job role to job role."

### Jasmin Caine

Currently completing a L4 Associate Project Management apprenticeship

"The recognition from companies like Virgin Media that university isn't the only way into work is massively important. You get both technical experience and practical experience."

## Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping

“Whilst the city centre’s skyline is filled with cranes, our streets should not be crowded with people who have no roof over their head. Rough sleeping and homelessness are not inevitable consequences of a 21st century economy.”



**Andy Burnham,**  
Mayor of Greater Manchester

Earlier this year, GMCA launched a new strategy for Greater Manchester called ‘Our People, Our Place’.

Written in collaboration with 10 councils, Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, the NHS, transport, police and fire services, the plan sets out a collective ambition to make Greater Manchester one of the best places to live and work in the world.

By harnessing the strengths of the region’s people and places it hopes to create a more inclusive and productive city-region where everyone can succeed.

An essential pillar of this plan is to create safe and affordable housing for all residents so that people from all walks of life have access to affordable, high-quality housing and that no one has to sleep rough on Greater Manchester’s streets.

This last point is particularly critical given the growing issue of homelessness and rough sleeping in the region.

In 2009-10, 1,857 applications were accepted to local authorities for rehousing because of homelessness.

This increased by 85% to a peak of 3,428 in 2017.

And while progress has been made since then, work is still needed to meet GMCA’s goal of ending all types of homelessness in the future and supporting those in immediate need on the streets.

We’re playing an active role in delivering homelessness support and ensuring that shelters and community centres have access to free and enhanced connectivity.

‘Our People,  
Our Place’



## Spotlight: Delivering homelessness support through the Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity

In November 2018, Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham launched the 'A Bed Every Night' (ABEN) programme, which sought to provide 'a comfy bed, warm welcome, and personal support for anyone sleeping on the streets of Greater Manchester who cannot access other accommodation.'

The scheme was set up to support Greater Manchester's goal to radically reduce homelessness in the region by providing access to emergency shelter accessible over consecutive nights and enabling a longer-term move to more suitable accommodation.

Since May 2020, we've donated £100,000 to help the charity address the immediate challenge of getting people experiencing homelessness off the streets of Manchester.

To understand the impact that this donation will have on addressing homelessness in Greater Manchester we spoke to the head of the Mayor's Charity, Vanessa Haworth.

"We are hugely grateful for this donation from Virgin Media Business, as part of its ongoing work with GMCA. The funds will go towards the 'A Bed Every Night' programme, supporting rough sleepers across the region. This is part of our commitment to provide assistance to the homelessness sector's emergency response, in addition to our work pioneering prevention. Together, change is possible."

**Venessa Haworth,**  
**Head of Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity**

The Mayor’s Charity believes that everyone has the right to a safe and stable home. For Vanessa and her team, street homelessness and rough sleeping form only the tip of the iceberg. More needs to be done to address homelessness and to help those at risk of homelessness.

The charity is placing a big emphasis on using data and evidence to create real change and ensure people are kept off the streets permanently.

It aims to significantly reduce homelessness by 2024 through funding innovative and traditional projects, with an emphasis on building links across the Greater Manchester Homelessness network.

In the two and a half years since its inception there’s been a 52% reduction in rough sleeping across Greater Manchester.

Vanessa emphasised the importance of the private and public sector coming together to tackle issues around homelessness and praised Greater Manchester for being forward thinking in its approach.

As they look to the future, Vanessa and her team plan to shift their investment strategy to help address the deeper issues surrounding homelessness.

Vanessa says the charity will spread funds more evenly across four key tiers – emergency accommodation, temporary accommodation, stable/permanent accommodation and prevention – as it seeks to fulfil its vision of ensuring that any experience of homelessness becomes as rare and as brief as possible.

**52%**  
reduction in rough  
sleeping across  
Greater Manchester



## Spotlight: Equipping homeless shelters and community centres with free connectivity

“I think that everybody has something to give. Companies have a lot to give. Social responsibility and corporate responsibility to people. To give something back to the community and improve whatever it may be. It’s fantastic that we’re getting it more and more, and different areas are realising that they have some sort of community responsibility.”

**Tina Harrison (MBE), Group Lead at Growing Together Radcliffe**

In an increasingly digital age, many are still being left behind, with homeless people facing a higher risk of digital exclusion.

Helping someone get online can be life-changing. Digital literacy helps grow confidence, independence and wellbeing, giving people greater choice, control and opportunities to explore new avenues.

That’s why we’re committed to equipping charities, community centres, temporary accommodation and homeless shelters within Greater Manchester with free and enhanced connectivity (via Voom Broadband) for the next five years.

That connectivity can help vulnerable people apply for jobs, access digital services (e.g. for housing benefits) and also keep in touch with friends, family and support networks.

Alongside this connectivity we’re also looking to add volunteering to offer skills and training support to the service users at these sites.

One example of this is Age UK in Trafford, where local Virgin Media Business team members have already contacted the charity to offer their help with Age UK’s ‘Silver Surfers’ digital skills workshops for older people.

Working with seven boroughs and their respective community teams alongside the GMCA, we will deliver free and enhanced connectivity to a total of 21 homeless shelters and community centres in the region.

15 out of 21 sites are already installed or in the process of being installed. This so far includes a mixture of charities and community centres in Rochdale, Stockport, Trafford, temporary housing schemes in Bolton, Wigan and Oldham and a community hub in Radcliffe, Bury.

We spoke to Tina Harrison, MBE and Group Lead at Growing Together Radcliffe, to understand the impact that she expects the free connectivity to have on the centre and the people in the local area.

“It’s going to be a big help. We’re looking at doing a drop in café for youngsters, so they’ll be able to access the internet to do online work for school because they may not have it at home.”

Tina told us that the connectivity will also benefit adults and the elderly, helping them set up online banking, acquire the digital skills they need to book GP appointments or learn to use the internet safely.

Through this work and our digital support for Greater Manchester’s youth we aim to support Mayor Andy Burnham’s plans to help all under-25s and over-75s in Greater Manchester get online.

## Empowering people with digital opportunities

Greater Manchester is home to the largest digital and creative cluster outside London.

Right now the region has over 10,000 digital and creative businesses, generating £5 billion of GDP each year.

It's a place where high value jobs are being created for local people every day and where investment in digital infrastructure, connectivity and transport is helping businesses thrive, from start-ups and home-grown companies to world-recognised brands.

This is all part of Greater Manchester's strategy to become a 100% digitally-enabled city region.

In April 2020, GMCA launched a new Digital Blueprint which set out a three-year approach to becoming a top five European digital city region where communities, businesses, academia and public services work together to innovate and ensure that growth benefits everyone.

It's this collaborative, people-first mindset that binds everything together. Every goal set out in the plan aims to improve the lives of local residents and empower them to fulfil the opportunities that a digitally fuelled city region provides, from accessing digital skills to new employment opportunities.

But empowering people starts with ensuring that everyone – whatever their age, location or situation – can benefit from the region's place as a digital leader.

## Digital exclusion in Greater Manchester

**1.2 million**

residents in Greater Manchester could be excluded in some way to access the benefits digital brings

Over  
**700,000**

people in Greater Manchester are only using the internet in a narrow or limited way

A further  
**450,000**

are classified as 'non-users'



The likelihood of having access to the internet from home increases as income does.

Only 51% of UK households earning between £6,000 and £10,000 have home internet access, compared with 99% of households with an income over £40,000.

The link between people experiencing poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if you are on a low income you have much less chance of being online.

While this issue has existed for a long time, the impact of Covid-19 on certain communities has highlighted the divide further, illustrating that digital inclusion should now be considered a human right and connectivity a basic utility.

When disadvantaged children were picking up all of their learning from home during the pandemic, many were unable to access the same online learning resources as children whose parents had access to IT skills and resources such as computers and Wi-Fi.

These children may have had to resort to using basic websites and sharing resources with siblings, which restricted their access even further and led them to miss out on valuable learning opportunities.

“Not having a computer or knowing that their internet connectivity may not be as strong as it should be is terribly isolating. You’re not seeing that face of the member of staff who makes a difference in your life.

41% of our children are classified by the government as disadvantaged. Parents are having to make really difficult choices, where there might only be one device in a household with two or three children.”

**Glyn Potts, Headteacher,  
Newman RC College**

Only  
**51%**  
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between £6,000 and  
£10,000 have home  
internet access



To tackle the issue head-on, GMCA set up the Greater Manchester Digital Inclusion Taskforce in December 2020.

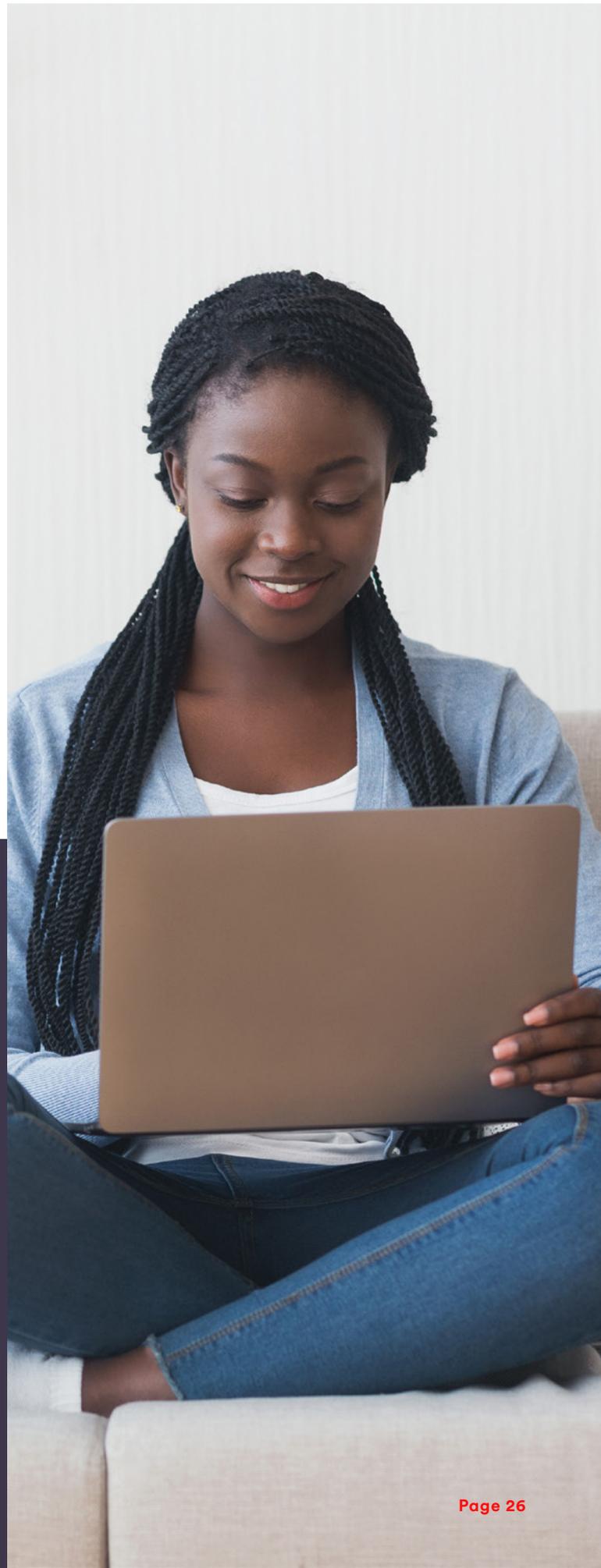
Bringing together industry, voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, public sector partners, local schools and health, the taskforce is shaping an action plan to address the interrelated barriers to digital inclusion and the digital divide, including connectivity, accessibility, affordability and skills.

But addressing digital exclusion doesn't just lie on the shoulders of the public sector. Collaboration with businesses is also vital to making a difference and getting people digitally engaged.

Working directly with GMCA through the LFFN programme, Virgin Media Business has been driving the improvement of connectivity and access to digital services for young people in the region.

Acting quickly enabled more students to take part in online lessons, empowering them to work independently, reconnect with their peers and complete homework without falling behind.

**As a result of this support, many schools saw an increase in the number of hours of schoolwork completed and improved engagement with teachers and tutors through regular 'check-ins' and pastoral support.**



## Spotlight: Helping Greater Manchester's young people get online

“Digital exclusion is always a consideration of ours. We need to ensure that pupils with limited or no access to a laptop or internet are not disadvantaged, and that their ability to learn is not negatively impacted.”

**Andy Potts, Assistant Principle at The Hathershaw College**

# 4x higher

digital exclusion levels among schools with the highest number of pupils eligible for a free school meal.

# 19%

number of pupils in Greater Manchester claiming free school meals during the pandemic.



In direct response to the closure of schools in 2020, GMCA invested in digital kit bundles for disadvantaged and digitally excluded pupils through the Greater Manchester Technology Fund.

We supported this effort with a donation of £50,000, helping the scheme provide 567 digital kit bundles – including laptops and dongles with preloaded data to enable internet access – to those most in need.

Acting quickly enabled more students to take part in online lessons, empowering them to work independently, reconnect with their peers and complete homework without falling behind.

As a result of this support, many schools saw an increase in the number of hours of schoolwork completed and improved engagement with teachers and tutors through regular ‘check-ins’ and pastoral support.

## Spotlight: Equipping schools across Greater Manchester with improved digital services

Following the immediate need to support disadvantaged students at home, the attention now turns towards ensuring that schools in Greater Manchester have access to world-class digital services.

We've offered professional consultancy to schools across the region, providing free and comprehensive Wi-Fi surveys to help improve their overall wireless provision.

GMCA helped coordinate the offer to schools across the seven boroughs, with the aim of aiding classroom learning and boosting all services that are reliant on high quality Wi-Fi.



## Breaking down barriers to help Greater Manchester become a global digital influencer

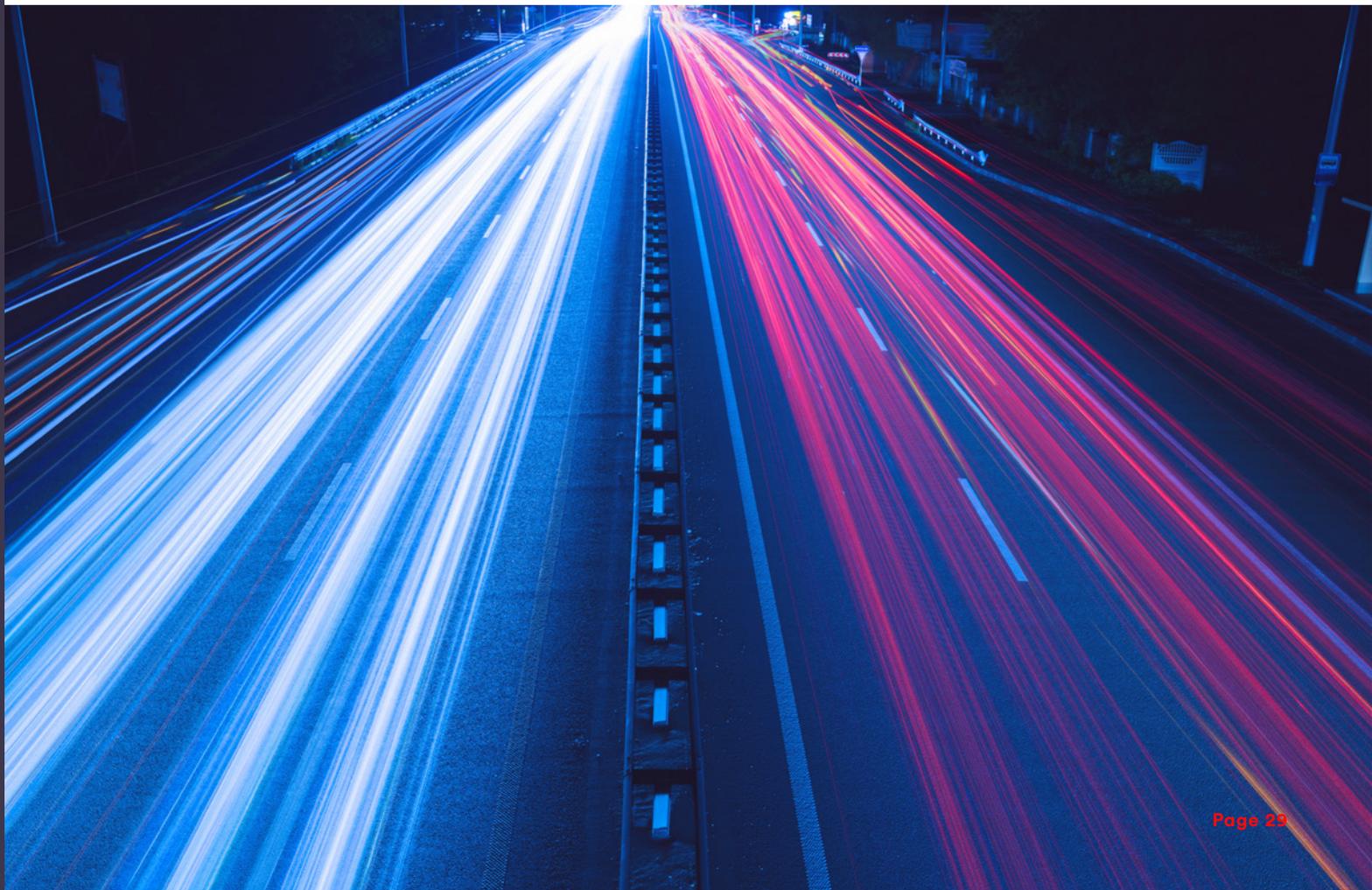
In the previous section we talked about the launch of the third Greater Manchester Strategy – ‘Our People, Our Place’ – which focuses on ensuring that all local residents can benefit from economic growth and the opportunities it brings throughout their lives.

Alongside creating safe and affordable housing for all, the plan aims to tackle the underlying barriers to participation and productivity. Making sure every child has equal opportunities to learn, for example, or creating fulfilling jobs for people to progress and develop and creating safer, stronger communities where people can live happier lives and older people are valued.

But this vision will only be achieved through new approaches which are shaped by the communities themselves. That’s why Virgin Media Business and GMCA have been working closely with public, private, and voluntary sector partners to engage with local boroughs. We want their combined ideas, energy and determination to break down those barriers and carve out a new path to prosperity.

It also means investing in digital technology that will create stronger standards and shared services that will drive further improvements and value for money.

We’re proud to play our part in supporting local community projects, delivering better network infrastructure through the LFFN programme that will encourage more public sector collaboration and lead to better outcomes for Greater Manchester’s residents.



## Spotlight: Volunteering in the community

“We’ve had a focus on vaccination centres within Manchester and Wigan – to have an elderly person grip your arm, nervous about being vaccinated, and to have their trust in your hands, it really makes my team and I feel special and proud to volunteer.”

**Julian Holland, Community Lead Regional Manager, Virgin Media Business**

Community is a big focus for both GMCA and Virgin Media Business. Because of this we’ve been working closely with neighbourhood teams across seven Greater Manchester councils to identify high-impact volunteering opportunities.

We’ve committed to providing 1,000 hours of volunteering every year. We are already closing in on the 1,000-hour mark for 2021 and will continue to volunteer beyond our baseline commitments.

Local staff are each given five paid volunteering days to help deliver social value projects at a community level. They’ve already volunteered their time across Trafford, Bury, Manchester, Salford and Wigan.

Team members in Bury delivered white goods and children’s clothing to Covid impacted communities, including a baby bundle pram, baskets and clothing to a vulnerable mother.

Volunteer drivers also helped transport vaccinations between Bury’s vaccination centres, ensuring they got to the places that needed them most.

In Trafford the focus was on transformation. Volunteers have been supporting local park maintenance and planting.

The ‘Up Top’ project has seen 20 Virgin Media Business team members reclaim the unused top floor of a multi-storey car park for community use, creating a thriving curiosity garden with a community allotment, pop-up food vendors, monthly cinemas and live music events. The project is focused on bringing the community together and reclaiming ownership of the space for all those who live around it.

All this volunteering work is ongoing and is continuing to make a difference to the people of Greater Manchester to this day. The work is making a positive contribution to the lives of those who live in the area while bringing a sense of fulfilment, motivation and community to members of our team.

## Just the start of the journey...

When we first partnered with GMCA in March 2020 we set out to deliver the largest Local Full Fibre Networks Programme in the UK, providing advanced connectivity that will fuel a wide range of digital transformation and smart city projects across the region.

The ultimate goal is to help Greater Manchester deliver on its bold ambition to become a world-class digital city-region, where everyone – no matter who they are or where they come from – can get online and access the services they need to thrive.

While better connectivity is important to delivering on these ambitions, the programme was never just about technology. It was also about investing in people through a range of bold social value initiatives that would directly engage with local communities on the issues that matter most, from tackling social and digital inequality to providing the skills and resources people need for the future.

We have enjoyed the opportunity to work alongside GMCA to understand and help overcome the challenges Greater Manchester is facing, particularly in light of the impact of Covid-19 on the region's economy and its citizens.

With the right strategy and investment in place, it's possible to tackle some of the biggest issues facing the communities right now.

Not all of the answers to these wider problems sit in the pages of this report. While authorities across the country are facing similar challenges, they also have issues that are unique to them alone.

That's why it is so important to work collectively to identify the problems and then create the right solutions. The phase 'there is no one-size-fits-all approach' is often overused, but in this case it really is true.

Adaptability is crucial. We quickly learned that plans can and will change as a result of external factors beyond anyone's control. So while having a proper strategy in place is vital, authorities must also be prepared to work closely with suppliers to maximise the social value delivered.

When the country went into the first national lockdown, for example, we agreed to provide financial support ahead of schedule to help ensure students at risk of digital exclusion could access the right tools and resources at home.

Developing the right programme works best when there is a holistic strategy across the entire operation to help steer where businesses can work with authorities to deliver social value.

In this case, GMCA's 'Our People, Our Place' strategy provided an excellent blueprint for public, private and voluntary sector collaboration across health, transport and the economy.

By listening to what was happening on the ground we were able to gather more intelligence at a community level, which helped ensure we were delivering the right impact for Greater Manchester.

We are learning more about the impact of our social value work in communities every day. Our partnership with GMCA is continuing to thrive, and we're excited to see what the future holds for this important region.



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