



# Rural Digital Inclusion: Blueprint to Delivery, Northumberland

Clr Nick Oliver – Cabinet Member, Digital  
Chris Thompson – Director of Digital and IT

# The starting point – rural reality

- Least densely populated county
- Patchy mobile & broadband in rural areas
- Education, care, tourism and business impacted
- Communities left behind

# The blueprint:

- **Offer a long-term WAN**
- **Heavy focus on social value (digital inclusion)**
- **Place-based fixes & evidence-led mobile**

# Using the WAN to build the backbone

- **262km** new fibre; **146** Council sites
- **120k** properties passed; discounted backhaul
- **Village halls:** free broadband pilot (86 sites, 1-year free)
- Altnet/MNO interconnect: **Blyth** → **Berwick** spine
- **115** Schools

# **Social Value and Inclusion Partnerships**

- **Funded roles via social value (CAN, NICRE)**
- **Digital champions network in communities**
- **Skills, device support, events in village halls**

# Craster mast (from not-spot to lifeline)

- ~**200** households + **250k** visitors/year
- Partnership: Craster Parish Council + Railsite/Atlas
- Mast in Council car park; **gainshare** funding
- Safety, small business, visitor experience

# Connectivity Improvements Since 2020

- **Superfast >30 Mbps  $\approx$  97.85%** (Sept 2023)
- **<2 Mbps down to 0.28%**
- **Ultrafast >100 Mbps: 15% $\rightarrow$ 33.5% (2022)  $\rightarrow$  >95% (Mar 2025, internal est.)**
- Momentum from Superfast, LFFN, WAN & commercial builds

# Mobile: SRN + local evidence

- **Shared Rural Network** upgrades across UK
- Local **StreetWave** surveys from Council vehicles
- Public survey: **1,000+** responses

# Village halls as resilience hubs

- **Free broadband for 86 village halls**
- **Resilience hubs** in storms
- Multi-channel comms

# Funding the hardest miles

- **BDUK Project Gigabit** vouchers (national)
- **NCC voucher top-ups** bolt on to close gaps
- Use **gainshare** wisely for rural not-spots

# What's next

- **Evidence-led mobile** signal surveying
- **Scale champions** programme in halls
- **Replicate Craster** in next not-spots
- **Device access & social tariffs** via halls/libraries
- **Inteligens: data-driven targeting & continuous improvement**
- **Connectivity summit – 15 October 2025**

**THANK YOU!**

**[chris.thompson01@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:chris.thompson01@northumberland.gov.uk)**