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Local Digital Index **2024**

Case Study | **Greater Manchester Region**

Building Stronger Local Economies



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The Index is a vital tool for highlighting regional and city strengths to see who is leading the way and where there are opportunities to learn and collaborate. In the 21st century to be competitive we actually need to be highly collaborative. To look beyond our regional boundaries to a shared national ambition to grow our economy in a way that benefits everyone.

This feels very natural to us, a city whose symbol is the worker bee. Where our mission is to make Greater Manchester the most highly networked city-region in the world, with a unique new model of city-region governance uniting all sectors – public, private, academic, voluntary and faith – in one big mission, which is to make us one of the 21st century’s most innovative and inclusive cities to be found anywhere in the world.

With the fastest growing digital and tech hub in Europe in recent times we know that digital capital matters. It plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth by fostering a thriving ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship – with over 10k digital companies, employing over 85k people and anchored by Government agencies like GCHQ and BBC at Media City, tech unicorns and a diverse SME base. By leveraging cutting-edge technologies and promoting digital skills, Greater Manchester has become a magnet for tech start-ups and established companies alike, creating high-quality job opportunities and boosting productivity.

The collaborative efforts between public and private sectors, educational institutions and the local community further enhance this growth, ensuring that the benefits of the digital revolution are widely shared. The index shines a light on how to do that and we are delighted to share our examples of best practice, so we can learn from one another.

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Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester

We are spotlighting the Greater Manchester region (Manchester, Salford, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan) in our Local Digital Index 2024 as it stands out for its rapidly growing digital economy and its key strengths:

- A diverse tech ecosystem
- Strong industry engagement
- Presence of innovation accelerators
- A well-established Combined Authority
- Technical community and collaboration
- Tech start-up sector

Greater Manchester's (GM) tech sector thrives with a diverse ecosystem, strong industry engagement, and support from a well-established Combined Authority. Innovation accelerators and a collaborative technical community drive growth in its expanding tech start-up sector, making it a prime hub for tech talent and investment.

The region's **key priorities** include:

- [Innovation District - Sister](#) – The £1.7bn innovation district is a key part of the GM Investment Zone, opened this year and will be delivered over the next 15 years, predicted to generate over 10,000 on-site full-time jobs and contribute around £1.5 billion to the economy every year in Manchester. This is a joint venture between The University of Manchester and Bruntwood SciTech. It will offer a collaborative environment where companies can benefit from proximity to talent, knowledge hubs, excellent connectivity, and a vibrant mixed-use neighbourhood. By 2035, the 18-acre site aims to be globally recognised as a leading Applied Innovation District.
- [Trail Blazing devolution deal](#) including single funding settlement.
- The approach to tech education – The introduction of the [Greater Manchester Baccalaureate \(MBacc\)](#) supporting young people with pathways into tech careers and set to transform technical education and growing the economy.

- Digital Inclusion focus, ensuring residents have access to the opportunities digital brings which is central to improving social isolation, job opportunities, health and wellbeing opportunities, and increasingly public sector support through the digital world.

Greater Manchester displays a diverse and thriving ecosystem where industry partners collaborate closely with academia, the public sector, entrepreneurs, and investors through a quintuple helix model, exemplified by [Greater Manchester Digital Security Hub \(DiSH\)](#). This collaboration is strengthened by networks and events led by both the ecosystem and commercial partners.

Innovation economy supports the development of clusters exploiting the established core regional strengths in:

- AI and data
- Cybersecurity
- HealthTech



Building a strong local digital ecosystem

Greater Manchester aims to be a greener, fairer, and more prosperous region where everyone can thrive, from childhood to old age. The focus is on empowering marginalized groups, ensuring access to education, skills, and employment opportunities. The region's frontier sectors, such as digital and creative industries, have the potential to tackle major challenges like health inequalities and clean growth. Greater Manchester seeks to drive productivity through research, development, and innovation, boosting investment, resilience, and job creation. It also aims to establish itself as a world-leading digital city region, with a growing digital workforce.

The Greater Manchester region has a broad range of initiatives and partnerships which allows it to make great strides when it comes to creating and developing a strong tech ecosystem such as:

[Greater Manchester Strategy 2021-2031](#). Greater Manchester is committed to a greener, fairer, and more prosperous future through a collective action plan led

by city-region organisations. Key tech and digital priorities include building world-class smart digital infrastructure and ensuring digital inclusion for all, particularly under-25s, over-75s, and disabled residents. The region aims to become carbon neutral by 2038, with improvements in air quality and natural spaces. Economic goals centre on sustainable business growth, job creation with community benefits, and skills development aligned with industry needs. The plan also tackles housing, food, and fuel poverty, enhances education and training for youth, and invests in resilient, vibrant communities.

[The Greater Manchester Digital Blueprint](#). The Digital Blueprint underpins and supports the commitments in the Greater Manchester Strategy 2021-31. The key priorities include empowering people and communities, developing responsible data-driven public services, fostering a resilient economy, creating inclusive and sustainable places, and reinforcing its role as a global digital leader. To achieve these, strategic enablers focus on enhancing digital skills and literacy across life and work, strengthening the digital talent pipeline, expanding world-class digital infrastructure, and leveraging academia and research for innovation.

[Innovation Greater Manchester \(iGM\)](#). Greater Manchester has convened a unique cross-sector partnership to achieve its ambition of building an inclusive innovation ecosystem that benefits the entire city region. This initiative positions Greater Manchester as a leader in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with a cluster of innovation-led businesses driving growth and prosperity across the North.

[ZEBOX](#), a global startup accelerator which supports sustainable innovation with a focus on the supply chain. In October 2023, ZEBOX launched its UK hub in Manchester, marking its sixth global location. This Manchester hub aims to drive decarbonisation and operational optimisation in the supply chain through advanced technologies like AI. [The hub](#) will connect UK and Northern European startups with corporate partners to foster innovative solutions addressing sustainability and operational challenges in logistics.

Eagle Labs launched the [Ecosystem Partnership Programme](#) to enhance local entrepreneurial ecosystems by supporting tech and digital businesses. Participating organisations receive matched funding to expand or introduce initiatives



addressing local challenges and opportunities. In Manchester, the Startup Activator initiative, in collaboration with Manchester Digital, focuses on empowering startups led by diverse founders in Greater Manchester's outer regions. Through regional roadshows, participants gain resources, mentorship, and guidance. High-growth potential startups are selected for intensive support, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to scale successfully.

Developing a strong cyber ecosystem:

Greater Manchester is a key player in the expansive and rapidly evolving cyber ecosystem of the North West, a region marked by the dynamic growth of cyber businesses and bolstered by the presence of critical national institutions like [GCHQ](#) and the [National Cyber Force](#). Collaborative environments, such as the [Greater Manchester Digital Security Hub \(DiSH\)](#) play a crucial role in fostering innovation and supporting the growth of this ecosystem.

With significant opportunities to align skills, innovation, research, and investment, the North West's cyber corridor is on track to establish itself as a globally recognised hub for cybersecurity excellence. DiSH is led by Barclays Eagle Labs with a consortium of Plexal, University of Manchester and Lancaster University.

Greater Manchester has become a leading cyber security hub in the North West and the UK, [housing 53% of the region's 456 cyber security offices. The city of Manchester itself has 272 offices](#), ranking second nationally, and is home to 177 unique cyber security businesses, about 9% of all UK firms in the sector. The region hosts major private sector players like BT, Darktrace, Deloitte, KPMG, Microsoft, and Thales, with strengths in creative media, fintech, ecommerce, and healthtech. Additionally, Greater Manchester boasts five universities offering cyber security courses, with over 1,690 students, half of whom study at local institutions.

[Greater Manchester Cyber Strategy 2023 – 2028](#)

shows that cyber security will play a key role in Greater Manchester's ambitions to boost productivity, resilience, and economic growth. Through collaboration, innovation, and skills development, the growing cyber sector will create high-value jobs, supporting a greener, fairer, and more prosperous city-region. The plans emphasise community engagement and outreach to attract diverse cyber talent across GM. The expanding cyber ecosystem will foster partnerships between businesses, academia, and public sector organisations, benefiting other sectors and strengthening the UK's cyber ecosystem. It will also enhance research, innovation, and support skills development, enabling residents to safely access digital opportunities.

Well-established digital and tech festivals, as the tech ecosystem spans from informal networks and meetups to established conferences like [Connected North](#) and [DTX](#), alongside one-

off events and [Manchester Tech Festival](#) has also emerged as an important player within this landscape. Other flagship events which bring the tech community together include [Fintech North](#), [Manchester Digital FinTech Conference](#), [Digital Skills Festival](#), [Digital City Festival](#), [Cloud Imperium CitizenCon](#), [Manchester Animation Festival](#).

“Greater Manchester’s thriving tech ecosystem is a testament to its culture of collaboration and innovation. The region’s commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment, coupled with its forward-thinking approach to skills development, has led it to become one of the fastest growing tech hubs in Europe.”

Marie Hamilton, Government Strategic Partnership Director, Microsoft





Digital and tech innovation driving transformation

The region is leading transformation and promoting innovation across its industries through a variety of regional innovation programmes, including:

[UK Government's Innovation Accelerator programme](#), as Greater Manchester region is one of the three pilot area across the UK to share £100 million government funding (alongside Glasgow City Region and West Midlands). Led by Innovate UK and DSIT, the programme supports 10 projects across Greater Manchester, advancing the region's 2030 innovation vision by fostering collaboration between local government, businesses, and innovation agencies. The initiative focuses on leveraging synergies between advanced technologies and frontier sectors to drive inclusive growth and strengthen Greater Manchester's innovation ecosystem.

[Health Innovation Manchester](#), established in 2017, is a unique place-based innovation organisation. It has evolved its operating model to deliver impactful innovation that benefits local communities, system partners, and industries. The organisation's success and strategy are driven by four key elements: integrated governance, blending capabilities, strong industry partnerships, and a relentless focus on methodology. [Health Innovation Manchester](#) works with a wide range of partners from the NHS, local councils, industry, and academia to introduce innovations in frontline care. Since Greater Manchester took control of its £6bn healthcare budget in 2016, the region has become a leader in improving local health.

Greater Manchester has a strong focus on AI, highlighted by projects like the [Turing Innovation Catalyst](#) which looks to commercialise and accelerate AI, deep digital tech, and digital trust technologies, and [Centre for Digital Innovation. Manchester was named the UK's most AI-ready city outside London](#), with Salford ranked third, according to research from SAS. The ranking considered factors such as the number of AI companies, university courses with AI elements, job availability, AI events, hackathons, Google search trends for AI solutions, and the average Innovate UK grant per business by location.

The strength of Greater Manchester's AI cluster is reflected through this year's Tech Climbers Entrant Report. Entries for the Tech Climbers list, which showcases the fastest growing, product-led tech companies, were dominated by the region's AI businesses, with the ecosystem creating 70% of the projected, new jobs coming to Manchester's tech sector over the next 12 months. Additionally, the report reflects the high interest and confidence in the region's AI innovations from investors, since 69% of AI entrants had already received funding.

Greater Manchester is also advancing data-driven public services through close collaboration between the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), local authorities, Fire & Rescue Services, and Transport for Greater Manchester. By adopting a "do things once" approach, Greater Manchester is standardising processes and reducing duplication, eliminating the need for separate approaches in each local authority. An example of this is the [Early Years App](#), which aims to improve children's development by replacing paper-based assessments with a digital app, allowing parents and carers to complete assessments, access supporting information, and have more control over their data. This initiative connects professionals like health visitors with families, streamlining communication and support.

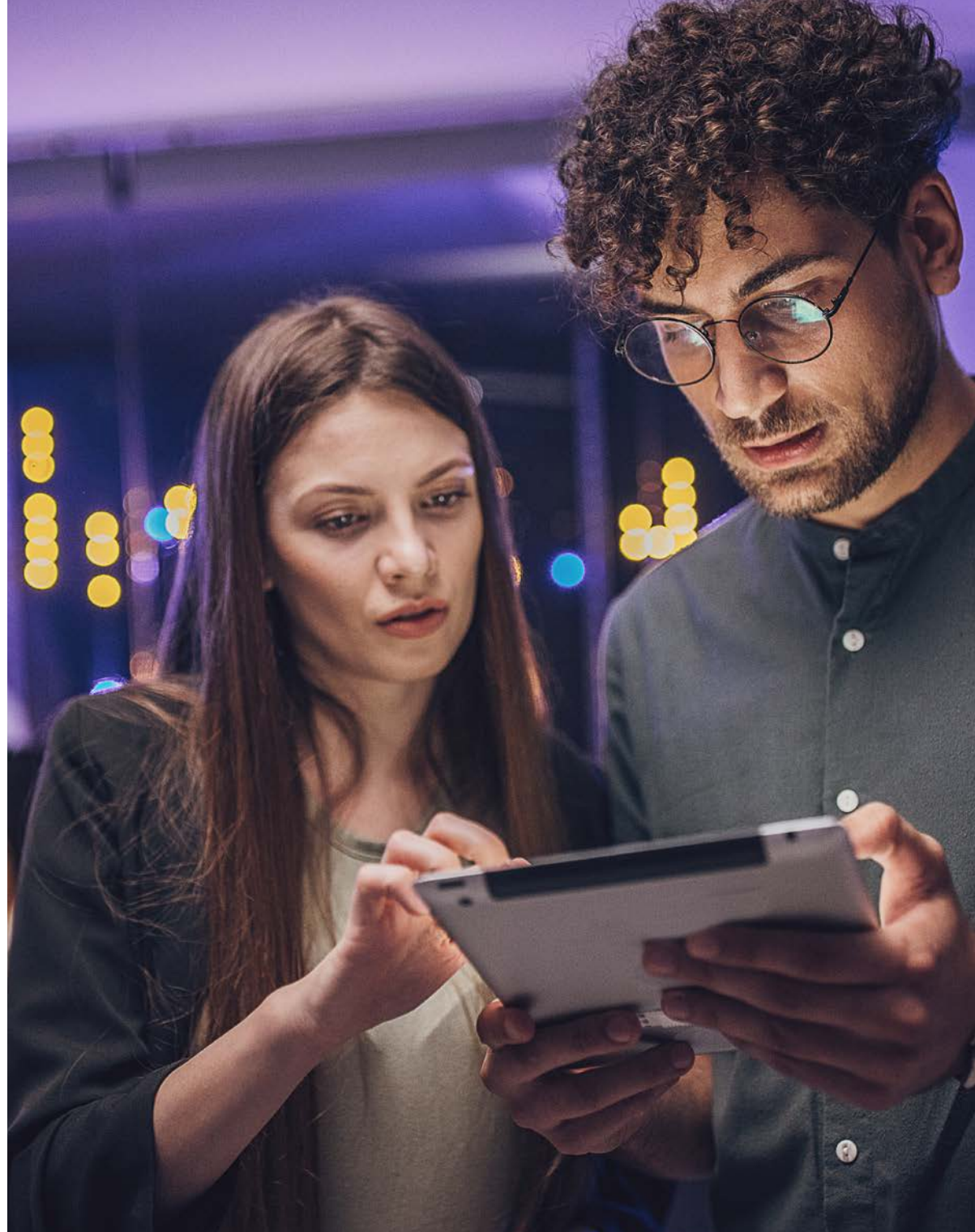
It is part of a broader effort to digitise public services, improving access and integration for citizens.

As shown in our Local Digital Index 2024, in Greater Manchester, the number of funded businesses with access to private investment is 563 and in Manchester is 270, and the number of businesses which received Innovate UK funding in Greater Manchester is 852 and in Manchester is 357, which allows businesses to invest in technology and talent and boost their regional digital economy. The innovation intensity for all sectors in Manchester is 8.18% and for Greater Manchester is 6.75%. The percentage of innovative companies in Manchester in the digital sector is 23.17%. In the North West, there is a total spend of £6.5billion for R&D, with £211million from Government and UKRI funding, £1.4billion in higher education, £4.8billion in business enterprises, and £20million in private non-profit organisations.

Digital skills and inclusivity for a future-ready workforce

The [Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(GMCA\)](#) is committed to building a robust pipeline of digital talent, aiming to make Greater Manchester the leading destination outside London for businesses seeking a highly skilled digital workforce. Central to this vision is ensuring that all residents, regardless of background, have access to the skills needed for high-quality, fulfilling jobs. By focusing on clear pathways for skills development, GMCA is dedicated to enabling young people in particular to understand and navigate the steps required to enter and succeed in digital careers. This approach not only equips residents with the capabilities for modern jobs but also strengthens Greater Manchester's appeal as a dynamic, digitally skilled city for future investment.

Greater Manchester launched [the BeeLine service on the GMACS \(Greater Manchester Apprenticeship and Careers Service\)](#) platform to help students explore the MBacc route.



[BeeLine](#) offers guidance through technical education pathways into high-quality roles in the region, supporting young people in making informed career decisions. The Manchester [Baccalaureate \(MBacc\)](#) is Greater Manchester's flagship program for 2024, offering a new technical qualification co-designed by educators and industry leaders, including Microsoft, BBC, Daikin, and Sodexo. Launching in September 2024, the MBacc provides tailored pathways from school to high-demand skilled jobs in Greater Manchester's key sectors. Starting at age 14, students can choose from seven MBacc gateways—digital and technology, financial and professional services, construction, green economy, creative/cultural, and sports—based on local labour market needs. This initiative connects young people with technical education opportunities and prepares them for high-value careers in a growing economy.

Greater Manchester's ambition to become a world-leading city region includes a strong commitment to tackling digital exclusion. Ensuring that all residents—regardless of age, location, or circumstance—can access digital opportunities is fundamental to addressing social isolation, expanding job prospects, enhancing health and well-being, and improving access to public sector

services. To achieve this, Greater Manchester has developed tools to identify areas where residents are at higher risk of digital exclusion, enabling targeted support where it's needed most. The [Digital Exclusion Risk Index \(DERI\)](#) was developed by the GMCA Research Team during the pandemic, and addresses digital exclusion challenges for residents and communities. Initially created for Greater Manchester, it is now used nationally to help regions assess the extent of digital exclusion and understand its connection to broader social inequalities. Additionally, GM works closely with a network of digital inclusion locality leads, who focus on delivering tailored support to their communities. This proactive approach is key to creating a more inclusive, connected city region.

Some key initiatives in the region include:

[The North West Tech Talent Consortium](#) is also a great example of initiative as a group of organisations dedicated to enhancing Greater Manchester's tech sector, focused on inspiring the next generation of technologists and fostering diversity by welcoming experienced career switchers and returners. Their goal is to enrich the tech industry with diverse perspectives and talent.

[CyberFirst](#) Schools & Colleges initiative is delivered by IN4 Group in the North West and West Midlands, from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), a part of [GCHQ](#). By April 2026, this program aims to impact thousands of students in Greater Manchester by awarding up to 85 schools and colleges with CyberFirst bronze, silver, or gold recognition. It will deliver at least 70 CyberFirst days annually to immerse students in technology and cybersecurity careers. The program also includes an annual education conference and celebration event for teachers, local government, academia, and industry. Additionally, 15 Empower events will engage over 7,000 Year 8 girls across the North West, inspiring them to explore STEM subjects by connecting them with current tech and cyber professionals.

[Get Online Greater Manchester: Digital Skills Map.](#)

A survey of Greater Manchester residents found that about [16% lacked support to access digital services](#) and didn't know where to seek help. In response, an interactive map has been created to help residents, community groups, and frontline staff locate nearby resources. The map shows local public Wi-Fi spots, device access locations, in-person digital skills sessions, Greater Manchester Databanks, and facilities offering free SIM cards, device usage, Wi-Fi, and digital support.

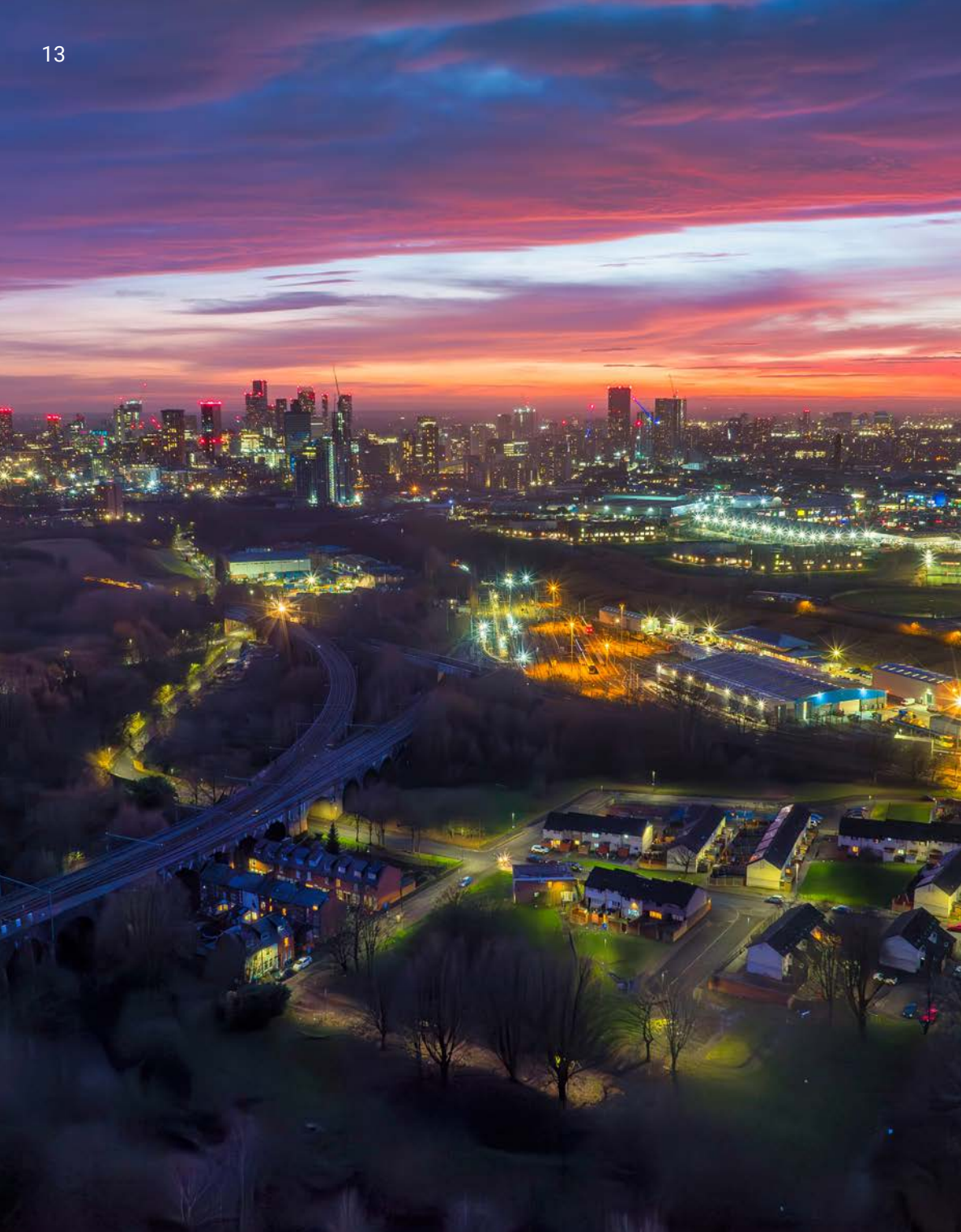


BT Group has been working with the charity [AbilityNet](#) to improve the [digital skills of older and digitally excluded people in Greater Manchester](#) over the past year. The region was one of five locations around the UK where digital skills trainers have been providing free training to support older people. The partnership reached around 1,000 people across Greater Manchester in live one-to-one or group sessions that have focused around specially created training modules on useful subjects such as staying safe online, making a video call, or accessing public services. Of those attending the sessions, three out of four have said they are more confident about tech and three out of five said they feel less isolated. The partnership is now moving in to phase two with BT Group and AbilityNet extending their reach into new areas of the UK where they have identified gaps in digital skills provision but anyone can access the materials wherever they are [via this link](#).

Victoria Johnson, Social Impact Director at BT Group said:

“Tech has become so entwined in our daily lives and how we communicate, work, and connect with the world around us. Older generations shouldn’t feel left behind, especially since having basic digital skills can offer so much independence.”

As shown in our Local Digital Index 2024, in Greater Manchester the number of STEM roles advertised in 2023 was 39373, with the percentage of digital roles advertised being 20.05%.



Digital Infrastructure for enhanced connectivity

Greater Manchester has a world leading digital infrastructure supporting resilient high speed connectivity across the city region, and hosting critical national infrastructure. Greater Manchester has leveraged public sector investment to accelerate the roll out of fibre infrastructure across the city region.

In March 2020, Greater Manchester [secured £23.8 million in government funding for the UK's largest Local Full Fibre Networks Programme](#). Led by Virgin Media Business, this initiative will install up to 2,700 km of fibre optic broadband across the region, connecting over 1,500 public sites. Additional upgrades in Salford and Manchester, along with new connections through the Tameside Cooperative, will further boost the area's digital infrastructure. This collaborative effort, involving local authorities and Transport for Greater Manchester, strengthens Greater Manchester's position as a top European digital city-region and supports future smart city and digital transformation projects.

Building on the success of the LFFN programme, [GM One Network](#) aims to create a unified, efficient, and secure network infrastructure across Greater Manchester's public sector organisations. By establishing a single active network with virtual networks for each organisation, it will enable better use of existing Full Fibre investments, improve resilience, and enhance speed, it also facilitates collaboration among GMCA, local authorities, and key services. GM One Network supports smart city initiatives, enhances user experience with seamless connectivity, and accelerates remote work while reducing network service costs. The project also delivers significant social value, offering support to local startups, career mentoring, digital skills training, and new apprenticeships.

Greater Manchester has also secured [£3 million in funding](#) to support innovative tech projects aimed at reducing carbon emissions and enhancing residents' quality of life across the city region. This funding, backed by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and partners, will be invested in the [Greater Manchester 5G Innovation Region's SMART Decarbonisation Network project](#). The project's primary goal is to address climate change by accelerating carbon reduction efforts, ultimately creating a healthier,

more sustainable environment for residents. The SMART Decarbonisation Network project in Greater Manchester will connect air-source heat pumps in social housing using 5G and Smart Energy Grids to optimise energy use, lower costs, and reduce emissions. A Digital Road Network will also be trialled to ease traffic congestion, cut emissions, and prioritise alternative travel modes like walking and cycling for improved safety. Insights from these trials will help create scalable models for future projects in areas such as building management, education, and health, establishing Greater Manchester as a model for sustainable urban innovation.

Other examples include:

The construction of a [£350 million data center in Reddish](#), backed by Metro Mayor Andy Burnham to strengthen the region's tech and AI industries. Led by Kao Data and approved by Stockport Council, the project is expected to be completed by 2026. Once operational, the center will boost digital innovation, attract tech businesses, and position Greater Manchester as a leading tech hub in the UK.

As shown in our Local Digital Index 2024, in Manchester the Superfast broadband availability

is 95.2%, the gigabit broadband availability is 83.9%, the 5G coverage is 99.8% and for Greater Manchester is 92.7%.

Greater Manchester's success in technological progress and innovation acceleration is rooted in its diverse tech ecosystem, strong industry engagement, and the presence of leading innovation accelerators. Supported by a well-established Combined Authority, the region fosters collaboration within a vibrant technical community, driving forward its thriving tech start-up sector and innovation economy.

Greater Manchester's development of clusters capitalises on its core regional strengths in cybersecurity, AI and data, and HealthTech, showcasing its ability to adapt and excel in emerging industries. This strategic focus positions the region as a leader in innovation, ensuring sustainable growth and global competitiveness in the years ahead.

Read more in our Local Digital Index 2024, to look at the data which shows Greater Manchester Region's strengths and opportunities, being a region which is nurturing talent, supporting start-ups, and driving impactful research, and being set to become a leading hub for tech advancement in the UK.

About techUK

techUK is a membership organisation that brings together people, companies and organisations to realise the positive outcomes of what digital technology can achieve. We collaborate across business, Government and stakeholders to fulfil the potential of technology to deliver a stronger society and more sustainable future. By providing expertise and insight, we support our members, partners and stakeholders as they prepare the UK for what comes next in a constantly changing world.



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