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Case Study

Silicon Sands, Blackpool

Silicon Sands in Blackpool: Creating Significant Economic Growth through a Low-carbon Digital Economy

Linking renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and heat reuse to support substantial employment growth and major social impact.

Blackpool Council is a unitary authority delivering all local government services to its residents. Through offshore wind, subsea fibre links, and the Blackpool Airport Enterprise Zone, the Council is positioned to grow as a hub for data, AI, and climate tech, shaped by low carbon energy and digital growth.

The Council engaged Cambridge Management Consulting and edenseven to help shape its 'Silicon Sands' vision and realise its ambition to be recognised as one of the UK's AI Growth Zones. Together we developed a strategic blueprint, options on funding and governance, and an engagement plan to build a 1GW digital economy. In addition we led the specification and selection process for the 6MW exemplar data centre, designed to run on renewable power and reuse heat for local buildings. This anchored the wider programme to attract investors, and demonstrate how Blackpool can retain control of its environmental journey while creating new generational job opportunities and sustainable growth.

The Opportunity

With offshore wind, subsea fibre, and the Enterprise Zone at Blackpool Airport, Blackpool has the assets to build a digital hub powered by renewable energy and strong connectivity, but the Council needed a clear plan to bring these strengths into delivery. As such, it engaged and worked with Cambridge MC and edenseven to shape Silicon Sands: a structured programme that can attract investment, deliver local benefits, and maintain Council control.

The support needed for this project was not only technical but strategic. Bringing together data, energy, and economic renewal, the Council asked Cambridge MC and edenseven to support three priorities:

- Firstly, the Council needed a strategic blueprint to explain the programme to investors, government, and the local community in clear terms. This blueprint had to connect directly with wider priorities, such as creating skilled jobs, tackling fuel poverty, and building civic pride; without this, there was a risk that the opportunity would remain aspirational and fragmented.
- Secondly, a 6MW exemplar data centre became the pilot anchor project, designed to run on renewable energy and reuse heat for local buildings. The Council wanted this to showcase ethical, sustainable data infrastructure. To succeed, it required a clear specification, a selection process, and governance arrangements that balanced external investment with local control. This exemplar data centre would then be followed by a programme of significant, larger data centres.



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- Thirdly, funding, governance, and partnership structures needed to be mapped in detail. The Council wanted options beyond a single developer model, including joint ventures, co-operatives, and other shared ventures which would put in place the building blocks to be recognised as one of the UK's AIGZs, and build an electricity and digital infrastructure to support up to 1GW of data load.

The Solution

Blackpool Council mobilised Silicon Sands from vision to delivery, with support from Cambridge MC and edenseven.

Together, we established a clear picture of the current position, mapping stakeholders, short-term milestones, and gaps in alignment with the town's economic, social, digital, and net zero goals.

We produced a Strategic Blueprint: a clear document that explains the vision to both technical and non-technical audiences. Alongside this, we supported the Council to lead the specification and selection process for the 6MW exemplar data centre, with edenseven leading the sustainability criteria and energy assumptions. This involved defining technical standards, building sustainability requirements into the design, and running a transparent process to identify credible developers who shared the Council's ambition.

We also carried out a detailed review of funding, governance, and partnership options, highlighting how joint ventures, co-operatives, and blended finance models could help the Council to attract investment while retaining control.

The Approach

The partnership built momentum quickly without losing sight of long-term goals. Blackpool Council required quick wins, including the exemplar data centre, to attract attention from investors and central government. Simultaneously, the Council sought to avoid giving up strategic control. By working in parallel across vision, funding, governance, and technical delivery, we established a balanced programme that delivered short-term progress and safeguarded long-term value.

Our Methodology

We adopted an Agile approach, coordinating four workstreams in parallel and using regular sprints to deliver outputs in short cycles. This helped the Council and partners respond to new information and keep decisions moving. Furthermore, we borrowed elements from more structured methodologies, such as Waterfall, to keep control over the specification and procurement of the exemplar data centre. This hybrid approach provided both pace and rigour, ideal for a complex public-private programme.



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Challenges

- Several challenges emerged across the partnership. Initially, there was no single framework for managing the growing interest from investors and developers. Together, we put in place a transparent assessment process, categorising expressions of interest, and matching potential partners to different phases of the programme.
- Secondly, there was a risk of over-complication, whereby too many technical details have the potential to alienate community stakeholders. To address this, the team produced plain-English communications and non-technical summaries, ensuring that the vision strengthened civic pride as well as investor confidence.
- Thirdly, the funding landscape was fragmented, with multiple grant schemes and private finance options to consider. Together we mapped these into a single funding timeline, providing the Council with clarity on sequencing and options to consider.
- Governance posed a final challenge regarding how to maintain control without deterring partners. The team presented a range of governance models, each with pros and cons, and to recommend co-operative and join-venture approaches that maintained the Council in a leadership role while sharing risk and reward.
- By combining structured programme design with adaptive delivery, and by anchoring the work in Blackpool's wider social and economic goals, we helped the Council to build Silicon Sands into a credible, investable, and community-backed programme.

The Team

Craig Cheney: Managing Partner for Public Sector & Education, Craig leveraged his robust local government knowledge and first-hand experience with public/private commercial structures and deals to lead the Silicon Sands project.

Pete Nisbet: Managing Partner for Sustainability and Managing Director for edenseven, Pete provided strategic advice on our use of power and renewables.

Duncan Clubb: Senior Partner for Data Centres, Edge & Cloud, Duncan's digital infrastructure expertise was invaluable for executing a data centre project of this scale.

Bridgit Hartland Johnson: Senior Consultant (Grid and Infrastructure expert) at edenseven. Bridgit provided detailed insight into shaping the grid and electricity strategy and engagement with potential long term energy partners.

Kat Wilcox: Lead for Net-Zero Strategy at edenseven, Kat managed the project to success, combining experience in both sustainability and programme management.



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Results

Project Delivery: The partnership moved Silicon Sands from concept to an agreed delivery shape, turning its requirements, specifications, and pre-existing components into a sustainable and actionable hub which maintained their control and position within the project, while meeting their ambitions to bring significant positive change to the region.

Established Funding & Governance Options: The Council has a set of routes to test, including joint ventures, co-operatives, and blended finance models, with clarity on sequencing and trade-offs.

Sustainable Impact: By leveraging our sustainability expertise, and the data-driven strategies of our sister-company, edenseven, we supported the council to realise Blackpool's pre-existing environmental potential, securing it as a leader in renewable energy usage and the positive applications of digital growth.

Increased Opportunities: Equipped with our experience mobilising projects in the public sector, we increased the opportunities available to Blackpool Council and the Silicon Sands project by identifying different avenues for its fruition, such as joint ventures, co-operatives, and other shared ventures.