



COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT  
**April 2024 - June 2024**

# Our Cotswolds, Our Plan 2024-28

## Our Ambition

To tackle some of the big challenges faced by our residents while providing a good level of key services.

## Our Priorities



## Executive Summary Highlights

- On street residential charge point scheme (ORCS) funding has been secured for last tranche of installations for Electric Vehicle Charge Points, with the business case approved at July Cabinet recommending site allocation. Work to prepare for the installations is underway to ensure Distribution Network Operator (DNO) connections can be secured within the required timeframes.
- The Asset Management Strategy was presented and approved by Cabinet in May. The Council has adopted the strategy and instructed its consultants, Carter Jonas, to review its existing assets in line with the strategy.
- The new Strategic Housing Manager was appointed in May and work has begun exploring alternative models and financing for additionality, along with seeking partnerships to support the Council's ambitions.
- The Planning Application for the zero carbon affordable housing development in Down Ampney was submitted in June.
- The sewage summit took place on 8th July at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, with all three water companies—Thames Water, Severn Trent Water, and Wessex Water—in attendance, along with the Environment Agency and representatives from Earth Watch.
- The 'Getting Connected' digital inclusion courses have positively impacted over 60 older adults, with significant participation in Bourton on the Water, Fairford, and Tetbury, where attendees have formed social groups and boosted their digital skills.
- The Spring Round for Crowdfund Cotswold closed in April with one early submission quickly meeting its target and a further six projects as part of the main round, collectively worth over £110k. Four projects were awarded a total of £23,000 grant, with two deferred. As of 1 July, one of the four has already hit its funding target.
- The Unsung Hero Awards scheme, designed to recognise the efforts of volunteers across the district who dedicate their time to helping others, was launched in July. The first awards will be presented on September 25th at Full Council.

## Delivering Good Services



### The Context

As a council, our purpose is to provide vital services to our residents, businesses, and visitors. The council is committed to delivering services effectively and efficiently, ensuring they reflect our dedication to addressing climate change and offering value for local taxpayers. The council's services will uphold high standards and deliver value for money. We will collaborate with our contractors and partners, including town and parish councils, to sustain valuable services and contribute to the preservation of the Cotswolds environment that we all take pride in.

### Actions we are taking

Implementation of projects highlighted in the for the Water Park have continued to focus on making it easier for people to walk and cycle around the area, dispersing visitors more widely and enabling people to be more physically active.

Some unspent funds from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) were redirected to enable delivery of more new cycle stands, working alongside businesses and organisations with a focus on the Water Park Area.

Officers have been working with Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) and Cotswold Lakes Trust to complete a new cycle entrance into Neigh Bridge to ensure connection to the wider cycle network and ensure safe and easy access for cyclists.

The delivery of a safe crossing point on the Spine Road remains a priority and discussions and site meetings have been held with GCC and Cotswolds Lakes Trust to progress options for design detailing for a new crossing.

The first stage of finalising design is using funding allocated from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). Once the commissioned design work is finalised a decision will need to be made regarding the split of funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

The overarching aim of the improvement work in the Planning service is to provide a trusted, inclusive and transparent planning service. In that regard, performance improved markedly and the Government has confirmed that it no longer is minded to consider designating the Council for poor performance. Following the work already undertaken on the pre-application service, validation checklist, fee schedule, communication with applicants and timeliness of communication at key stages of the process, the recent priority has been the reduction in backlogs in the enforcement function and designing and testing the new enforcement form. These have now been introduced and are expected to deliver a reduction in repeat customer contact and chasing, as well as a reduction in the number of non-breach cases from the improved online reporting facilities and back office triage. The main piece of work that has recently gone live is the new process associated with the requirements to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) alongside the determination of Planning Applications.

The further improvement works arising from the Planning Advisory Service report and agreed upon by Cabinet have been added to the action plan, with delivery largely completed or on track. In light of the Council's decision to repatriate the Development Management function, some elements of the improvement programme have however, had to be abandoned or severely curtailed as they relied upon shared services and contracts.

## Responding to the Climate Emergency



### The Context

Nationally, the government's recent decision to extend deadlines for decarbonisation targets has sparked debates regarding its impact on the UK's progress towards net-zero emissions. While the shift in deadlines for ending the sale of new fossil-fueled cars and gas-fired boilers may not significantly alter industry trajectories, concerns persist regarding potential repercussions on the nation's climate commitments and international reputation as a leader in combating climate change. Professor Piers Forster, Chair of the Climate Change Committee, urges greater transparency from the government regarding the effects of these policy adjustments on future emissions and the likelihood of meeting targets.

In response to the Climate Change and Ecological Emergencies declared by the Council in July 2019 and a year later respectively, a comprehensive commitment to update the Local Plan in alignment with green principles has been established. This commitment is reinforced by national policies such as the Clean Growth Strategy and the UK Net Zero Strategy, signaling a broader governmental push towards environmental sustainability. Despite impending reforms to the English planning system, the Council remains steadfast in its efforts to update the Local Plan, anticipating a smoother transition facilitated by government arrangements.

### Actions we are taking

The Council's Climate Emergency Strategy of September 2020 identified the Council's different spheres of influence over carbon emissions in the District. These range from relatively easier interventions with lower impact (e.g. direct and indirect control of the Council's own operations) through to relatively harder interventions with potentially much higher impact (e.g. enabling District-wide action and engaging with all stakeholders).

The update process, initiated following a unanimous resolution in June 2020, encompasses a thorough review of Local Plan policies to ensure alignment with evolving environmental priorities. Public consultations, notably the Regulation 18 consultation in 2022, have yielded valuable insights, shaping the emerging Local Plan. Digital engagement tools have facilitated broader community participation, including previously underserved demographics.

In parallel, the Council is fortifying its evidence base through various studies, encompassing green infrastructure, sustainability appraisals, and housing strategies. Noteworthy initiatives include the development of a Sustainable Transport Strategy and the ongoing Cirencester Town Centre Masterplan project, both pivotal in shaping future transport infrastructure and urban development.

### 'Direct Control' actions

The business case and Council investment decision for solar PV and battery storage at the Council's offices at Trinity Road, along with another tenanted site, were approved by Cabinet and Council in July 2023. Delays were encountered due to concerns over the weight of the panels and adjustments have been made to the original design, integrating the PV panels into the roof structure. The new design, incorporating a mix of the commonly used 'hook and rail' system, received approval

from both Planning and the Structural Engineer. Works started on site in July and are expected to be completed during August. Additionally, four dual electric vehicle charge points have already been installed in the Trinity Road car park, providing accessible charging facilities for the public.

### **‘Indirect Control’ actions**

Waste and recycling collection, aside from being the Council’s single largest source of emissions, presents all councils with huge challenges and potential opportunities in the environment, the climate emergency, and digital services. While the bulk of waste collection vehicle replacements are scheduled for some years, attention is now turning to the potential for electrification of part of the waste collection fleet. The new leisure services operator is in place, and Capitol Grant Funding has been secured, which will enable the installation of further solar PV power on the Cirencester leisure centre, further reducing the cost of electricity for the site.

### **‘Place Shaping’ actions**

Efforts are underway to bolster the evidence base for drafting climate policies within the Local Plan (LP) partial update, integrating feedback from the Regulation 18 public consultation and insights gleaned from examinations of other authorities' ambitious climate policies. Concurrently, sustainable transport consultants are aligning LP policies with findings from the District-wide Sustainable Transport Strategy research. Additionally, consultants have been tasked with updating the evidence base and formulating policies for renewable energy and sustainable construction, both integral components of the updated LP. However, progress on further installations of electric vehicle charge points in Council-owned carparks has been impeded by delays with contractors and Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN). Despite setbacks, chargers at Trinity Road are now connected, with units planned for installation later this month. Furthermore, funding has been secured for the next tranche of installations under the On-street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS), and a business case is currently in preparation.

### **‘District-wide enabling’ actions**

Cotswold Home Solar was launched at the start of September and had strong initial interest. The communications team is working on ways to refresh and sustain a marketing campaign to make sure as many residents as possible can make use of the scheme. Retrofitting homes to reduce costs, energy consumption and carbon emissions is an essential component of national emissions reduction but remains a huge challenge. The announcements of the energy security strategy (Powering up Britain) include some measures that support home energy retrofit, but the national retrofit strategy, such as it is, remains the preserve of a non-statutory body (the Construction Leadership Council) and the national retrofit hub is in a very early stage of development. The increase in the Boiler Upgrade Scheme grant to £7.5k announced in September 2023 should encourage more households to fit low carbon heat pumps.

## **‘Engaging’ actions**

This remains a very important part of the Council’s overall climate crisis response, and there is much work to do to help build confidence and momentum among all District-wide stakeholders, from residents to businesses and public sector bodies. We are now working on the creation of a District-wide network of individuals and organisations motivated by the climate challenge and researching user needs in order to provide real value, aiming to replicate the success of West Oxfordshire District Council’s ‘Green Light’ communications platform.

Options to optimise the delivery of high-quality retrofit support are currently being explored and considered. A successful Gloucestershire-wide consortium bid to the South West Net Zero Hub (SWNZH) has enabled the Council to employ a retrofit engagement officer. Additionally, the Council is contributing to the development of a Gloucestershire-wide retrofit support offer through the Climate Leadership Gloucestershire (CLG) partnership.



## Delivering Housing

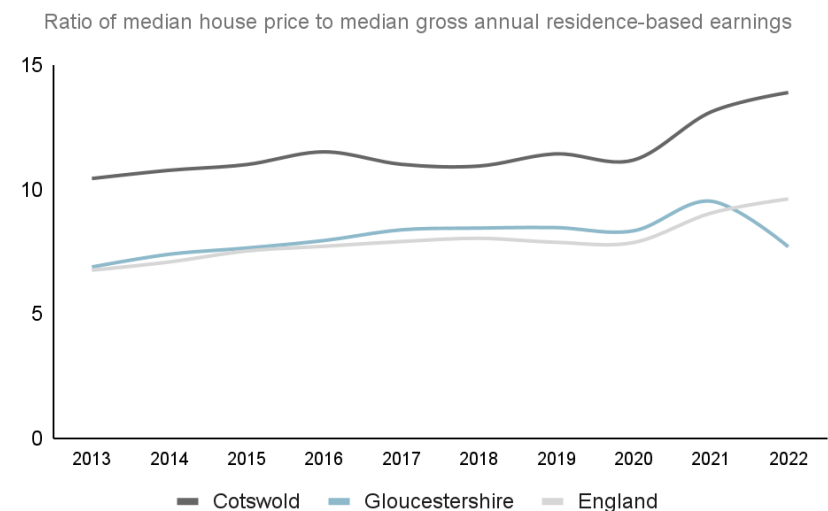


### The Context

The high quality natural and built environment makes the District a desirable place to live. Cotswold District has a high number of properties owned outright (37.8% vs. the 30.6% national average), reflecting the attractiveness of the District as a place to retire or to purchase a second home.

House prices and rents are relatively high. At the end of September 2022, the median property price in Cotswold District was £400,000, compared to £275,000 in England. House prices are falling due to the cost of living crisis, while rents are increasing. There is a shortage of good quality rented accommodation, that is genuinely affordable. Affordable housing helps to meet the District's housing needs and can include low cost home ownership or rented accommodation which typically has a discount of around 20% on the market rent; however, this may still not be truly affordable for some residents. Social rented homes have a rent that is lower than affordable rent and therefore provide homes for those on lower incomes or in receipt of full Housing Benefits.

The relatively high house prices and increasingly high rents, coupled with the lower than average earnings from local jobs, mean housing affordability is a significant challenge for residents in the District and is being made worse by the cost of living crisis.



### Actions we are taking

The Council's Affordable Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan was adopted by Cabinet on 8 February 2021 and set out the delivery strategy for the Council to accelerate the provision of social rented and affordable homes for local people. The current focus is to facilitate the affordable housing identified within the Local Plan and through rural exception sites and community-led housing opportunities, and to work with Housing Associations to maximise affordable housing delivery. The Council plans to go further and bring forward additional affordable homes through enabling and direct intervention, which may include the provision of land and other funding. In addition, any development the Council acquires or builds must be carbon zero in support of the Council's Climate Change emergency commitment.

Although this will increase the cost of affordable housing, it will reduce ongoing revenue costs for tenants. Based on the outcomes from the councillor workshop in October 2020, discussions with local Registered Providers (RPs), and a review of delivery options, Officers recommended that the Council establish a formal partnership with one lead Registered Provider.

An expressions of interest exercise resulted in Bromford being selected as the preferred RP, with the Kemble site to be taken forward via a Contractual Joint Venture (JV). Due to challenges with the site, including ecological challenges, the Kemble site was paused, and an alternative scheme on the derelict Broadleaze site at Down Ampney is being prepared for delivery first. Following a review of the Kemble site in the context of the cost of living crisis, the substantial subsidy that would be needed to deliver these homes and the ecological constraints, it was concluded that housing development on this site is not viable. In January 2023, Cabinet agreed to lease the land for use as allotments and community gardens. A revised valuation of the land based on its redesignation to community gardens has been undertaken to facilitate a lease agreement.

The Council and Bromford continue to collaborate on delivering carbon-zero affordable homes at the Down Ampney site, formalising their partnership with a Collaboration Agreement in November 2022. A communication strategy has been developed to ensure effective engagement with all stakeholders, including the Parish Council, local residents, and the community. A planned program of consultation began on October 10, 2022, with a second round of consultation in March to present detailed designs, house types, and layouts prior to the submission of the planning application. It was previously noted that the planning application would be influenced by the Habitat Regulations Assessment due to the site's location within the Zone of Influence for North Meadow, Cricklade. Consequently, the application could not be processed until a Mitigation Strategy was in place. Swindon Borough Council completed the mitigation strategy, allowing applications in the affected area to proceed. However, delays occurred in submitting the planning application due to concerns raised during the public consultation about drainage issues. Initial drainage designs were rejected by Bromford Housing Association for being non-adoptable. Although revised designs were eventually approved, this delay caused the Council to miss the submission deadline before the new Biodiversity Net Gain regulations came into effect. Despite this setback, the Ecological Appraisal was finalised, and the planning application was submitted in June. It is anticipated that the site may not be sufficiently large to meet the required offset. Alternative options, such as tree planting on other Council-owned sites or a financial contribution, are currently being reviewed.

The Old station, Sheep street was previously assessed for service provision such as homelessness accommodation and other housing options, but the conversion was found to be unaffordable. In December 2022, Cabinet agreed to develop the Old Station and Memorial Cottages for cultural and community use, working with local organisations to produce detailed designs, obtain quotations for the renovations and seek external grant funding. The Council have been working with New Brewery Arts, who prepared designs and costings to extend and renovate both buildings to provide Art studios, related offices and space that could be used for multiple community and small business purposes. Unfortunately, in December, New Brewery Arts concluded that the capital costs involved and the relatively limited grant funding that could be secured meant neither building is viable for renovation and conversion. In response, the Council issued a 'Call for Interest' in early March to attract a new partner capable of securing funding and development proposals. Following a review of opportunities and future options, a report was presented to Cabinet in July, which agreed to dispose of the Old Station and Memorial Cottages as separate assets in accordance with the Asset Management Strategy adopted by Cabinet in May 2024. Meanwhile, funding approved by the Council in February 2024 will be used to address structural repairs needed for the unstable wall at the Old Station.

In March 2021, the Council allocated commuted sum grants to two projects to deliver low carbon affordable housing. A sum of £478,500 was allocated to provide 100% social rent on a scheme of 15 units at Davies Rd, Moreton in Marsh; previously an open market scheme with 40% affordable housing only. A further allocation of £102,000 will be used to enhance the environmental sustainability of the homes. Cottsway Housing Association successfully submitted an application to Homes England for match funding. The completed homes were attending at an opening by CDC and the CEO of Homes England, to mark the construction of energy efficient homes in Cotswold.

The second project has an allocation of approximately £332,000 from commuted sums grants for a scheme of 14 homes at Sunground, Avening, a rural exception site, which will be 100% low carbon affordable housing. The scheme has received Homes England funding through Bromford, which is developing the scheme on behalf of Gloucestershire Rural Housing Association (GRHA). The scheme will provide nine social rented and five shared ownership homes for local people, incorporating rainwater harvesting, air-source heating, solar panels and biodiversity measures. This marks the third scheme supported by Cotswold District Council in answer to the Climate Emergency, and tackles fuel poverty among our residents.

## Supporting Communities



### The Context

The health and wellbeing of our residents is generally good and above the England and the county average in most measures. Cotswold District is one of the safest districts with very low crime levels and is surrounded by beautiful countryside. However, there are some challenges. Cotswold District has an ageing population; over the last 10 years, it has experienced greater growth across all 65+ age groups compared to England and Wales. Many older residents live alone, and coupled with the rurality of the District, loneliness and access to services are issues for the District.

The wider determinants of health also need to be taken into account - social, economic and environmental factors such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, and lifestyles which have an impact on people's health and wellbeing. This means that the Council needs to work with a wide range of partners, to pool resources and to apply a whole systems and asset-based approach to address challenges together.

### Actions we are taking

We want Cotswold District to be the best in the country for health and wellbeing, and promoting healthy lifestyles and providing opportunities for people of all ages to be active is key. A Leisure Strategy determined by local priorities and outcomes was developed with the aim of providing effective and sustainable physical activity and sport opportunities for local communities via investment in our stock of leisure facilities and other non-facility interventions. In March 2021, Cabinet authorised officers to work in partnership with other organisations on the feasibility of the projects in the Strategy. Specialist Leads for each of the three themes (Healthier District, Connected Community and Active Environment) have developed action plans for each area. Progress on the projects are being monitored by the Active Cotswolds Programme Board and reported to the Portfolio Board.

The spring round of Crowdfund Cotswold concluded in April. An early submission quickly met its target, while six additional projects, collectively valued at over £110,000, participated in the main round. Four projects received a total of £23,000 in grants, with two being deferred. By 1 July, one of the funded projects had already reached its funding goal.

Funding for the Holiday Activity and Food programme potentially draws to an end, early next year. Therefore, we have secured £50K funding through the Strengthening Local Communities fund, to offer 12 – 14 events, throughout 2025, equally distributed between the south and the north of the district. These events will offer activities for all children to enjoy, during each school holiday, offering information from key support organisations for all ages, and providing food during the events.

We will be offering a forum for all ages to share their thoughts on what's good and what could be better, in their communities. Using the Asset Based Community Development model, we will work with local community champions in each area to target needs of each community. Cotswold, in collaboration with Tewkesbury, Stroud, and Forest of Dean, funded a joint post to promote Rural Domestic Abuse Champions across districts. The post, offering training via Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service (GDASS), aids in identifying and supporting individuals in abusive rural relationships. To date, 11 new champions have been trained with 7 existing champions fully trained while 17 are awaiting further training. GDASS continue to offer a large number of training dates, attended online, with an aim to train employees at Cotswold in the early stages of planning.

Cotswold have re launched, in conjunction with the Police, the 'Safe Places' scheme. So far, we have at least 18 venues, in Cirencester and 10 in Bourton on the Water, signed up to offer a safe place to anyone feeling vulnerable or in danger. The Police Cadets will take on visiting Tetbury, Lechlade and Fairford during the summer to sign up cafes, pubs, etc, who want to offer a safe place during daytime and evenings. Each place will be listed on the Safe Places app <https://www.safeplaces.org.uk/> which can be downloaded, and will provide your nearest safe venue wherever you are, organisations will also display a Safe Places sticker in the window.

The Community Wellbeing Team continues to engage with various community groups, including the Chesterton Community Project Group, Bromford Housing, and The Salvation Army, to enhance resilience and improve residents' health. The 'Getting Connected' digital inclusion courses have positively impacted over 60 older adults, with significant participation in Bourton on the Water, Fairford, and Tetbury, where attendees have formed social groups and boosted their digital skills.

Community Fun Days have been planned in collaboration with the PCSO's, Bromford, Young Gloucestershire and local schools in Northleach, Stow, Moreton and Bourton and over 300 people attended.

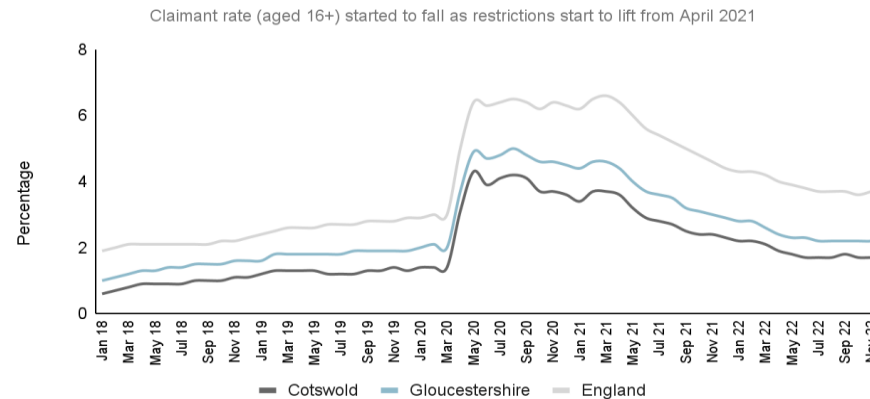
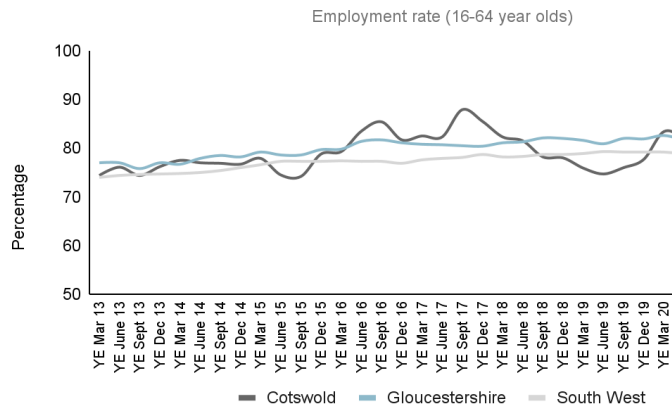
The Council has worked with the Chesterton primary school and the friends of the PTA to initiate, plan and run the DIG DAY earlier this year. This event was very successful and as a result a gardening after school club was formed. This day successfully enabled engagement with the local families.

# Supporting the Economy



## The Context

The District supports an economically active population of an estimated 42,600 and has strengths in finance and business services, ICT including science and technology, retail, and accommodation and food services. Around 90% of businesses are micro businesses employing fewer than 10 people. Median wages for people working in the District are below the national average, and affordability of housing is a significant issue for the District, which can result in skill and labour shortages. Historically, unemployment has been relatively low but increased during the pandemic. It has fallen back significantly and now stands at 1.9% - the lowest in the county, but still slightly above the pre-pandemic level. The national and global economies have faced further uncertainty as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and sharply rising prices, particularly for energy and fuel, which continues to impact on disposable income and living standards. Although energy and fuel costs, and the overall inflation rate, have dropped back, they are still significantly higher than prior to the invasion.



Source: ONS, Annual Population Survey

Source: ONS, Crown Copyright Reserved (Nomis)

Despite the poor spring weather, which saw rainfall consistently well above average, and the continuing, if lessening, economic pressures from rising costs, most businesses within the visitor economy have reported high levels of business activity. Consumer demand, despite the cost of living crisis, has remained strong and advance bookings have been steady.

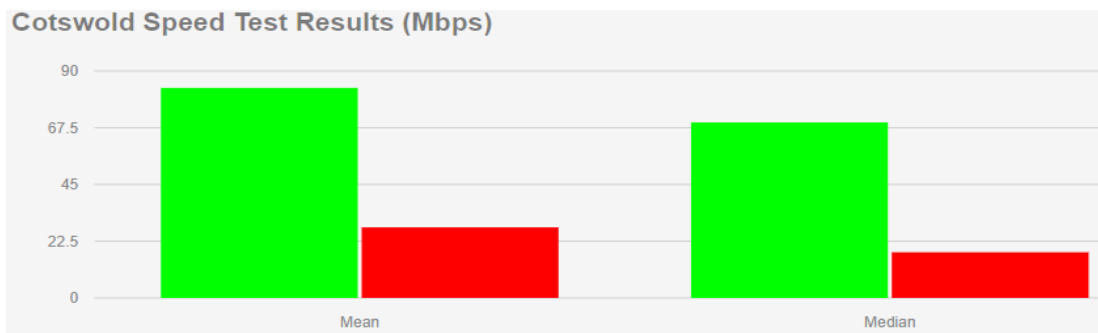
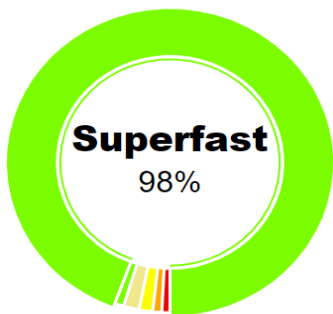
The one area that continues to be a particular worry is the availability of staffing with a number of businesses foreseeing problems with ensuring adequate staffing levels over the busiest summer months.

Overall, businesses within the visitor economy report substantial progress compared to 2023 levels and express a relatively positive outlook for the key peak season, though they are eager for improved weather conditions. This optimism is mirrored on a national scale, where VisitEngland's sentiment tracker indicates generally favourable trends. Key barriers to UK holidays have decreased: the rising cost of living has decreased by 3% (from 35% to 33%), personal finances by 5% (from 28% to 23%), and the rising cost of holidays and leisure by 3% (from 25% to 22%). The only significant barrier to experience an increase is the UK weather, which rose by 1% (from 30% to 31%).

The number of job postings remains high, reflecting continuing challenges in recruitment, but has fallen back from its peak. There are many companies at the cutting edge of innovation and the opportunity to grow key sectors like agritech, cyber and digital, medical equipment and environmental technologies.

The lack of a reliable broadband connection especially in rural districts can add to social isolation as well as reduce opportunities to be economically active. Openreach has been working in Cirencester and has announced plans to deliver full fibre to Tetbury, South Cerney, Lechlade, Northleach, Fairford and Bourton-on-the-Water by 2026 at the latest. However, there are still some areas where broadband is poor and even superfast connectivity is not sufficient for some businesses to operate in the way they wish to. The Council has been working with the Fastershire Project to address these areas. The Fastershire Project ceased at the end of March 2024 to be replaced by Project Gigabit, run by BDUK. The contract for Project Gigabit's 'Lot 18', which includes parts of the Cotswold District was awarded to Gigaclear and an announcement made earlier this year. We will be seeking details of how their programme is going to be rolled out.

The County Council has introduced the Gloucestershire Digital Household Grant to use 4G technology to deliver connectivity in remote locations where fibre is not practical or is prohibitively expensive and residents have speeds of less than 30mbps. The first phase of the scheme started in the Forest of Dean but is likely to be extended to the qualifying households in the Cotswold district towards the end of the year. The coverage of superfast (>30mbps) has increased slightly and ultrafast (>100mbps)/full fibre has moved up quite quickly according to figures on the ThinkBroadband website. This reflects the ongoing work by the infrastructure providers and the fact that commercial activity is concentrated on providing a full fibre service to the 'easier to reach' areas whereas the last 2% who do not yet have superfast broadband fall firmly within the 'difficult to reach' category, which the County Council scheme is seeking to address.



Much of our work to enable a vibrant economy will be achieved in partnership with key stakeholders ranging from the County Council, GFirst LEP, Chambers of Commerce and other business groups, town and parish councils, institutions like the Royal Agricultural University and Cirencester College and individual businesses.

### **Actions we are taking**

The Green Economic Growth Strategy 2021-25 sets out the challenges and issues for the District, and how they will be addressed. It identifies the key areas that will deliver growth in the District, as well as a recovery plan for the local economy. The strategy is in the process of being refreshed and a new draft will be brought to Cabinet later in the year. It will be informed by the new Gloucestershire Economic Strategy, which was approved by the County Council's Cabinet in May and will be considered by the new City Region Board in September 2024. Both officers and the Cabinet Member have been involved in providing feedback on the draft of the County Economic Strategy.

The Cotswold Economic Advisory Group, which was set up to advise, oversee and challenge the implementation of the Strategy and provide a link to the main institutions and the wider business community in the District, continues to meet regularly and provide valuable advice and assistance. The group has representation from key stakeholders including Cirencester College, the Royal Agricultural University (RAU), Cotswold Airport, Fairford and Lechlade Business Club, the Federation of Small Businesses and Gloucestershire County Council. Most recently, the Group met at the Fire Service College in Moreton-in-Marsh and received a presentation about the company's operations and plans for the future, as well as providing guidance on the refresh of the Green Economic Growth Strategy.

In 2022, the Council was awarded £1 million over three years from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for the period 2022-23 to 2024-25. The Council's Local Investment Plan, which sets out how the Council proposes to use the money, was approved by the government in early December 2022.



The fund has three themes – Community and Place, Supporting Local Business and, in year three, People and Skills. Year one projects have been completed, including ‘Clean and Green’ initiatives, new offices at The Growth Hub/Farm491 and a feasibility study for the Old Station building in Cirencester. Cabinet in March 2023 agreed to allocate up to £135,000 a year for 2023-24 and 2024-25 to the Growth Hub in Cirencester to provide business support. One positive benefit of this funding is that the Growth Hub has been able to expand its outreach programme across the District, particularly in the north in areas like Moreton-in-Marsh and Chipping Campden. The Business Navigators for the outreach programme have been using the Council’s Moreton Area Office as their base when working in the area. The first business event in the north of the District, a marketing workshop, was held on 20th February and was attended by over 20 businesses and a second event in June covered the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing. Cabinet has already approved a number of projects for 2024-25, including contributions to the former House of Fraser in Cirencester and a net zero housing exemplar scheme in Down Ampney. An open application process for the remaining funding closed on 17th May and the Assessment Panel met in June, making recommendations to the Chief Executive and Cabinet Member. Projects to be funded include a walking app for Chipping Campden, improvements to the sheds for Men in Sheds and the Youtopia youth project by World Jungle.

A further £764,292 was allocated to the Council from the Rural England Prosperity Fund over the financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25. This is a capital-only fund to support rural businesses to diversify with new products and services and to provide new community infrastructure. An addendum to the Local Investment Plan was submitted to the government at the end of November 2022 and it was approved in early April 2023. The approach has been to allocate funding for business grants, for active travel and for community projects, including assisting village halls with sustainability-related improvements. The Council has procured a delivery partner for the business grants (ALP Synergy Ltd) and the village hall grants (Gloucestershire Rural Community Council) jointly with the Forest of Dean District Council. Around £400,000 of business grants have been approved out of the overall allocation of £410,000 and these are at various stages of delivery. Six grants for village halls have been approved and a further round of applications closed on 12th July with a good number of applications which may well use up the remaining funding, for which just over £100,000 was allocated. A number of active travel and community and heritage buildings applications have been approved and some applications are still awaiting further information before a decision can be made as to whether to fund them.

Town centres are crucial, both economically and for civic pride. The number of vacant retail units in town centres serves as an indicator of their health and reflects the Council’s efforts to support their recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey conducted in August 2021 revealed that Cirencester had a town centre vacancy rate of 11%, which was three percentage points below the national average. This rate improved to just under 6% in April 2022 and to just under 5% in October 2022. As of early April 2024, the vacancy rate stood at 5.1%, with several of the remaining units either under offer or undergoing refurbishment. Notably, the former House of Fraser in the Market Place, which was the longest-standing vacant building, has now been leased to the Grace Network. Renovations are underway, and the building is expected to be occupied later this year. In the smaller towns within the District, vacancy rates are generally low, though even a few vacancies can significantly impact percentages. Currently, there are no concerns, but we remain vigilant about the pace of high street changes and the potential effects of the cost of living crisis. We will continue to monitor these developments closely. Additionally, the conversion of retail spaces to residential use in smaller towns is a concern as it may impact the town’s ‘critical mass’ and its ability to attract visitors.

The Cotswolds.com website run the tourism team is firmly established as the leading site for the Cotswolds, no 1 on Google with 1.6 million users and 3.8 million views in the last 12 months. However constant updating and improvements are needed to maintain and improve on this position. To this end, Cotswolds Tourism has successfully bid for two separate funding pots: UKSPF funding for website enhancements and via the Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) a Visit England grant for asset creation.

The Asset Creation Grant has allowed us to commission new imagery for the website and the UKSPF funding has allowed us to invest in a visual refresh for the website and additional functionality. The new functionality will include a microsite builder allowing better promotion of key strategic priorities, such as sustainability and accessibility, and give us the ability to better highlight niche and specialist interests and activities. Behind the scenes work has started and the improvements will go live at the end of the summer.

Other UKSPF funding has been secured to create Sustainability Champions and for Help to Thrive. The Sustainability Champions have been chosen to represent all areas of the visitor economy and businesses at very different stages on their sustainability journey. They will act as exemplars for other similar businesses as part of our efforts to encourage more sustainable business practices with the visitor economy. The Help to Thrive project is two pronged, helping businesses – and not necessarily businesses that would traditionally be thought of visitor economy businesses - to create new experiences that will appeal to visitors; the second prong is looking at helping businesses understand the best ways to get these new (or any existing experiences) to a wider audience via digital marketing and working with the group and trade market.:

Cotswolds Tourism operates as a membership organisation with all marketing paid for by the income generated. Membership currently stands at 418 businesses and income generated in the last year at £100k. The main marketing tools are the Cotswolds.com website and the Cotswolds Tourism social media channels that now have over 160k followers. With the new membership manager in post we have also restarted networking events and were delighted to see a total over 150 businesses signed up to the first two events.

The Cotswolds Plus LVEP, working across the wider area and led by Cotswolds Tourism, is now firmly established with a seven workstreams and associated action plans agreed: these include two covering Sustainability (public transport & active travel; business practices & bio-diversity), Business Support, Data & Research, Travel Trade, Accessibility & Inclusion, Skills & Training.

As part of the national promotion of the new tourism structure, Visit England organised a parliamentary drop-in session for Local Visitor Economy Partnerships at the Houses of Parliament, which Cotswolds Tourism attended. Unfortunately, this session coincided with the announcement of the recent general election.

The Council is working with partners to bring sites forward which will support the Council's ambition to grow high value, highly skilled, low environmental impact businesses in key areas including agritech, digital/cyber, medical equipment and environmental technologies, and to enhance the opportunities available for local people, particularly young people so that they have the skills they need to secure employment in the District. The Council is working with:

- The Royal Agricultural University (RAU) to bring forward their Innovation Village project. The Council's Chief Executive, the Cabinet Member for the Economy and Transformation, the Business Manager for Economic Growth and Prosperity and the Economic Development Lead held a number of

meetings with the then new Vice Chancellor, Chief Operating Officer and Director of External Relations at the RAU, encouraging them to be ambitious with their plans for the Triangle/University Gate site. The RAU came up with a concept of an 'Innovation Village' which will help to address global challenges around sustainable farming and food security. The plans include teaching and research space, incubator and grow-on business units and hospitality space, although this is likely to evolve as the project progresses. The Council assisted the RAU to secure £100,000 from the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee Strategic Economic Development Fund to assist with the cost of project management over a two-year period. A public launch of the project took place on 20 January 2023 and attracted considerable media attention. The council continues to liaise actively with the university on this project. A planning application was submitted for the scheme in April 2024 and has now been validated. (Ref: 24/01143/OUT).

- The former Mitsubishi site in Cirencester, is now renamed Watermoor Point and is home to a number of businesses. The office element is now over 90% let. The owners have also introduced an innovative and flexible co-warehousing solution, offering businesses a private, secure space within the warehouse, ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 square feet. Businesses also benefit from shared mechanical handling equipment and an on-site qualified forklift driver. Watermoor Point has been granted planning permission to install an additional 310 PV solar panels in addition to its existing 50kWh array, demonstrating its commitment to sustainability.
- ZeroAvia, which relocated from Cranfield to Cotswold Airport in 2021, is a leading innovator in decarbonising aviation and is developing a hydrogen-electric powered aircraft. The Council has been working with the Inward Investment Team at GFirst LEP (now part of Gloucestershire County Council) to support ZeroAvia which has increased its staff numbers from 15 to 150 onsite, with the plans to continue to grow significantly. The Council and Inward Investment Team will continue to support ZeroAvia in its ongoing growth. The company has undertaken a further successful test flight, staying in the air for 35 minutes – the longest test flight to date. Other sustainable aviation businesses, such as Vertical Aerospace and S&C Thermofluids, are already based at Cotswold Airport and the council is working with the airport's owners and others to promote it as a hub for such innovative businesses.
- Bathurst Developments in relation to the first phase of employment land at The Steadings development. They have appointed a developer partner. A reserved matters planning application was considered by the Planning and Licensing Committee in March 2024 and authority was delegated to the Interim Development Control Manager to approve the application subject to a number of conditions being satisfied.

The Applied Digital Skills Centre at Cirencester College was officially launched at an event held in May 2022. The centre will give the District a great opportunity both to develop a workforce with the digital skills needed in the 21st century, and also to grow its digital and cyber sectors. The Council continues to work closely with the College, particularly to identify partnerships with business which would be mutually beneficial. The College was also awarded £4m of funding from the Government for a new T-level building, which has now been completed and will help to provide high level skills in the District. T Levels are based on the same standards as apprenticeships, designed by employers and approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. It is equivalent to 3 A-levels and involves an industry placement. The Economic Development Lead has met with staff from the College to assist them with identifying potential placements for students. The College has most recently been awarded £3.5 million, in June 2023, to create a Student Wellbeing Hub.

On infrastructure, the Development Consent Order (effectively the planning application) for the A417 Missing Link was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate by Highways England in June 2021. The examination finished in May 2022 and the scheme was approved by the Secretary of State in November 2022. Kier Highways has been appointed main contractor. The project, which at around £460m, is the biggest infrastructure investment in the District and indeed the whole county for a generation, is designed to reduce congestion and improve road safety on this important link between Cirencester and Gloucester and, more widely, the M4 and M5 motorways. While new road building projects can be seen as environmentally damaging, much effort has been focused on delivering opportunities for environmental improvements as well as economic benefits. There will be opportunities for local suppliers, contractors and skills. Kier started on site with various preparatory works and are now advancing with the more visible phases of activity. Last year Kier and National Highways presented to a meeting of the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group and we intend to ask them to return to the Group at some point during 2025 when the project has progressed further.