



COTSWOLD

District Council

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT

July 2024 - September 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

- A closedown meeting was held with contractors to finalise the locations for the last eight cycle stands. The agreed final locations for the cycle stands are Cotswold Airport, Westonbirt Arboretum, and the Neighbbridge Car Park.
- Progress on delivering a safe crossing point on the Spine Road continues, with discussions and site meetings held with Gloucestershire County Council and Cotswold Lakes Trust to advance design options, alongside an agreement to fund the survey and design work using the remaining Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF).
- The Council have now entered into a contract with Connected Kerb for delivery of EVCPs in 4 Council owned car parks in Tetbury, Cirencester, Stow on the Wold and Moreton in Marsh respectively.
- The Cotswold Home Solar scheme, which helps residents understand their options, find reliable installers, and secure fair pricing, continues to be actively promoted, resulting in 17 homes already installing solar panels, 20 additional deposits placed, and anticipated savings of nearly £450,000 for residents across the district.
- The 'Cotswold Food Network' continues to thrive, bringing together over 30 partner organisations to support financial inclusion and food provision through Food Banks, Pantries, and Community Fridges.
- The Spring Round for Crowdfund Cotswold was successful, with five out of six supported projects exceeding their funding targets. In July, the Cabinet agreed to re-contract with Spacehive to continue the Crowdfund Cotswold program, enabling an autumn round that closed on 16th October.
- The Unsung Hero Awards scheme, created to honour volunteers across the district who selflessly dedicate their time to helping others, was launched in July. The inaugural awards were presented to the winners at the Full Council meeting in September.

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. A closedown meeting was held with contractors to finalise the locations for the last eight cycle stands. Due to delays in receiving confirmation and necessary permissions from the Gloucestershire County Council Estate Manager, two libraries were unable to have the requested cycle stands installed. The agreed final locations for the cycle stands are Cotswold Airport, Westonbirt Arboretum, and the Neighbridge Car Park. Throughout the delivery of this project, a total of 78 new cycle stands have been installed across Cotswold Lakes and the surrounding area, creating opportunities for people to connect to key locations using sustainable and active travel.

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. Agreement has been reached to fund the survey and design work for the creation of a safe crossing of the Spine Road from the remaining Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF), which is a critical next step towards delivery. Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) has raised safety concerns regarding the condition of the existing brick bridge, which will need to be addressed separately. Ongoing discussions are necessary to secure confirmation of the commitment to delivery and to establish longer-term timelines.

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 Development Management Improvement Plan, initiated after the PAS report, is actively progressing with a focus on streamlining enforcement. Efforts to reduce the case backlog have been supported by the introduction of a "Harm Checklist" to prioritise cases more effectively. A new interactive digital form for submitting complaints, now live on the website, allows users to upload photos, map locations, and access clearer guidance on the enforcement process and timeframes. These enhancements help manage customer expectations and free up staff to focus on investigations. The next phase of the plan will refine case management to concentrate on high-priority cases, with a tracking system in development to boost transparency and responsiveness.



Responding to the Climate Emergency

The Context

We are operating under a new Labour government who made some important and positive commitments on tackling climate change in its manifesto including:

- Meeting the UK's internationally agreed target to reduce carbon emissions by over two-thirds by 2030.
- Giving local authorities more powers to deliver a fairer green transition through better public transport and local nature protection.
- Stop granting new oil and gas licences.
- Seriously amp up renewables by 2030, creating jobs and cutting bills.

Actions we are taking

The Council's Climate Emergency Strategy of September 2020 identified the Council's different spheres of influence over carbon emissions. These range from emissions under the council's control (for example emissions produced from its own operations) through to those it can have an influence over by enabling District-wide climate mitigation action.

'Direct Control' actions

The Council's Climate Emergency Strategy of September 2020 contained a target to make emissions from the Council's own operations net-zero carbon as soon as possible, aiming for an 80% reduction by 2030 against a 1990 baseline, and a 100% reduction by 2045. A new need to comply with the GHG Protocol standards for emissions reporting has prompted a carbon emissions accounting review, and once this has been completed an updated report of progress against the net zero target will be carried out. In tandem a number of activities to reduce council carbon emissions are being carried out. Solar PV has been installed on CDC Council offices at Trinity Road. A business case has been agreed and an offer has been made to New Brewery Arts for the provision of solar PV too. Works will proceed swiftly if they agree to the proposal. Four dual electric vehicle charge points installed in the Trinity Road car park are fully operational, providing accessible charging facilities for staff (and the wider public). UK government grant funding is being sought to enable decarbonisation works across the CDC built estate and Ubico have been instructed to produce a profile of costs associated with waste fleet decarbonisation.

'Indirect Control' actions

Work is progressing with preparing the climate change policies of the partial update of the adopted Local Plan for a final stage of public consultation, ahead of submitting the updated policies to the Secretary of State for examination in public. This work has included consideration of feedback to the previous public consultation on the draft Local Plan, and taking on-board the findings of evidence base studies that inform the policy updates.

'Place Shaping' actions

The Council is working to provide residents without off-street parking with EV charging facilities to enable the uptake of EVs across the District. Plans to install electric vehicle charge points in Council-owned carparks have progressed. The Council have now entered into a contract with Connected Kerb for delivery of EVCPs in 4 Council owned car parks in Tetbury, Cirencester, Stow on the Wold and Moreton in Marsh respectively. The Portfolio Holder and officers also met with Government representatives to make a case for extending EVCP delivery and funding into 2025/26 to enable more EVCPs to be delivered on sites that have constraints and cannot be delivered in the current March 2025 grant timeframe.

The Council is also working to enable residents to install solar PV by helping them to understand their options, find a reliable installer and secure a fair price through the Cotswold Home Solar scheme. The scheme continues to be promoted and delivered. As a result of the scheme 17 homes have already installed solar panels, 20 have paid a deposit and residents are on track to save nearly £450,000 across the district.

Low carbon retrofit of the District's domestic building stock is an essential component of national emissions reduction but remains a huge challenge. The Council has reached a significant milestone however having recruited a Retrofit Engagement Officer to tackle this challenge. External funding for this post has been secured for 1 year. The Officer is tasked with engaging circa 800 households with EPC D or below to retrofit their homes to lower both running costs and carbon emissions. This forms part of a Gloucestershire wide programme of work on retrofit. Cotswold District Council is contributing to the development of a Gloucestershire-wide retrofit support offer through the Climate Leadership Gloucestershire (CLG) partnership. A contractor has now been procured to carry out this work.

The Council is working in partnership with other Gloucestershire-based councils to create a Local Area Energy Plan which is vital to enabling net zero within Cotswold District since it is needed to build the case to District Network Operators for investment and expansion in electricity grid infrastructure.

Work also continues through Climate Leadership Gloucestershire on delivering the Statement of Shared Intent (SoSI) in which all seven local authorities expressed an ambition to reduce surface transport emissions by 80% by 2030 and to reach net zero by 2050. A policy workshop was held recently regarding development of an EV taxi policy.

'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 staff to residents and from businesses to public sector bodies. We regularly run communication engagement campaigns to encourage behaviour change amongst District stakeholders. For example in September we ran a wear-not-waste campaign to reduce clothing waste.

We continue to provide funding for a business net zero engagement support programme. We have also relaunched Crowdfund Cotswolds which supports and enables local communities to invest in carbon reduction technology and activity. Carbon literacy training continues to be rolled out to staff and councillors. We have also developed a web resource to communicate to all stakeholders on the work of the council regards climate change.

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.

Delivering Housing



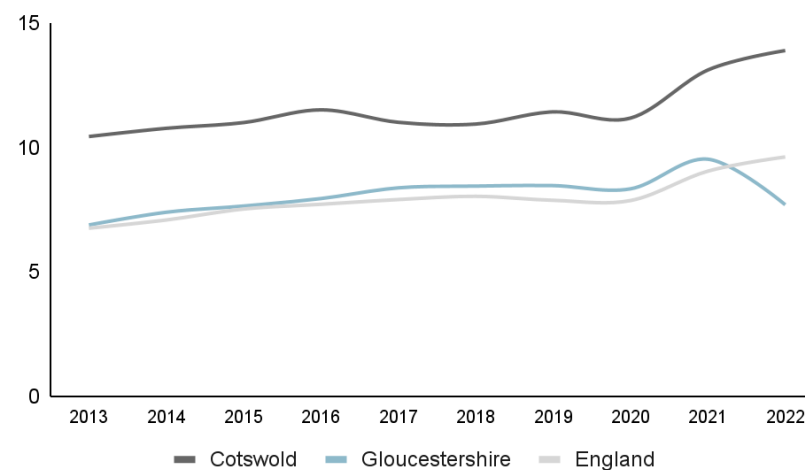
The Context

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.

Ratio of median house price to median gross annual residence-based earnings



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.

The partnership with Bromford to deliver carbon zero affordable homes at a site in Down Ampney is progressing well. The proposal includes a vacant plot owned by CDC and a neighbouring site which has domestic garages on it, which is owned by Bromford. The plans for 13 homes was submitted for planning consent at the end of May and will go to Committee in October 2024. The homes will be owned by Bromford and offer social rents. The carbon efficiency of these dwelling means tenants will have low utility bills, with electricity generated by the roof mounted Solar PV.

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. The properties are now being marketed for sale. Meanwhile, work to rebuild the unstable rear wall to the old station is nearing completion.

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.

Five projects out of six supported hit and in fact exceeded their funding targets from the spring round of Crowdfund Cotswold, making it a particularly successful round. Cabinet agreed in July to re-contract with Spacehive to continue the Crowdfund Cotswold programme, enabling an autumn round currently underway, closing 16 October.

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.

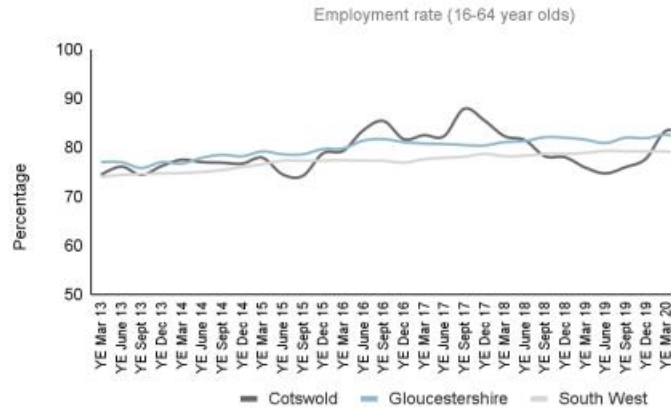
The 'Cotswold Food Network' continues to thrive and grow (no pun intended!), encompassing financial inclusion, food provision, via Food Banks, Pantries and Community Fridges, and gleaning (taking learning from Stroud's pilot) amongst it's work. 30 plus partner organisations are joining us regularly to feed into this work, share the support they can and do give already, and stay eager to increase their support in areas of need, where possible. Due to the changes at Feeding Gloucestershire, we now work independently with Lizzie Dyer, this change has had little effect on the positive work we're doing together, although there has been a slight change to our budget plans we're still on track to present the original offer of work, and small grants.

Supporting the Economy

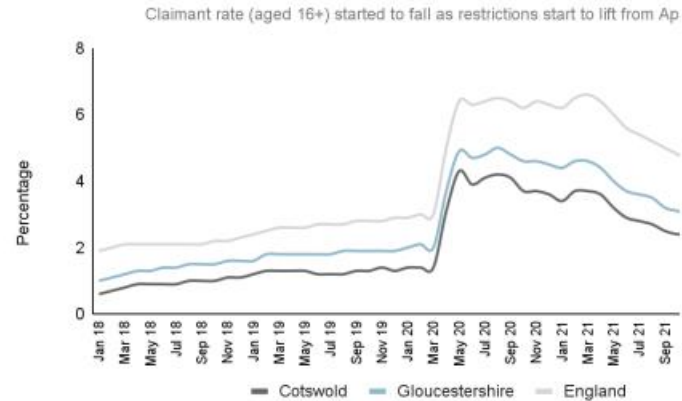


The Context

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 2% - 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



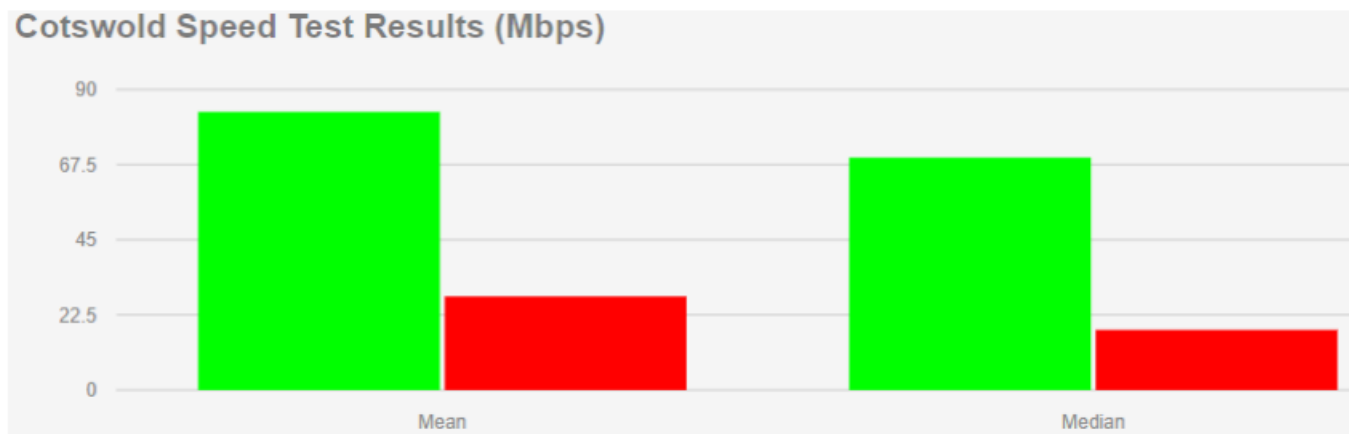
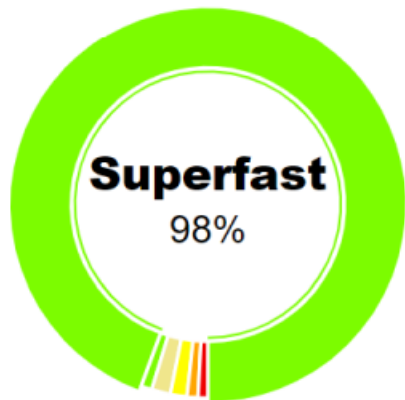
Source: ONS, Crown Copyright Reserved (Nomis)

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 'Lot18', 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 1.5% 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 was taken to Cabinet on 3rd October and approved for consultation. A final version will come back to Cabinet in the New Year for adoption. The draft strategy has been informed by the new Gloucestershire Economic Strategy, which was approved by the County Council's Cabinet in May and was noted 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 Core to Cloud, a cyber security business in

Cirencester, and received a presentation about the company's operations and plans for the future, as well looking in detail at the draft of the refreshed 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 and were taken to the panel in September. A decision notice for the successful applications has been published and can now move to the delivery stage. A number of active travel and community and heritage buildings applications have been approved.

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. At the end of September 2024, the vacancy rate stood at 4.8%, 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, no1 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.
- The Fire Service College/Capita regarding the potential for a wider Centre for National Resilience at Moreton-in-Marsh.

The Applied Digital Skills Centre at Cirencester College was officially launched at an event held in May 2022. The centre gives 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. Recently a site visit took place for councillors, officers, relevant parish councils and members of the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group to visit the site and receive a presentation on progress.