



COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT  
**January 2024 - March 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

- Cabinet approved funding for the Growth Hub in March 2023. The legal agreement requires them to focus on start-ups and provide an outreach service across the District and includes a target for the number of new businesses created with officers conducting monthly meetings with representatives from the Growth Hub to monitor progress against outputs/outcomes. The Outreach Navigator continues to work across the district, with the first well-attended event held at the Moreton Area Centre in February
- The Community Support Officer Food Sustainability post commenced in December 2023. The first Financial Inclusion Workshop took place in February with good attendance and services from across the district. The workshop focused on mapping available support and identifying gaps, with a follow-up session scheduled for May to enhance provision district-wide.
- The Holiday Activity Food programme continues to be a success, with 441 children booking a total of 610 activities during the holiday season.
- A Town and Parish forum event took place on February 28th, with a subsequent event planned for mid-June. Following the May elections, a Town and Parish newsletter is planned for distribution.
- The Public Consultation on the draft Local Plan policies was held between 1 February 2024 and 7 April 2024. Currently, responses are being considered, and further supporting evidence is being produced. A final version of the Local Plan will be consulted on in early 2025 before its submission to the Planning Inspectorate for an Independent Examination in Public led by a government-appointed Inspector.
- The Safer Streets Round 5 Funding of £50,000 has been distributed to Town and Parish Councils (TPCs) following engagement efforts. Updates on initiatives are currently being received, indicating progress and the implementation of various safety measures in local communities.
- Rollout of phase two in the Cotswold Water Park Strategy for cycle stand installations, with 51 stands now deployed across water park locations within Fairford, Lechlade, and South Cerney.
- Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC) successfully facilitated a group meeting for the District's Flood Wardens in February, providing valuable support and coordination efforts in flood preparedness and response.

## 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

Phase Two elements of the Water Park Strategy include projects to make it easier for people to walk and cycle around the area, which disperses visitors more widely and enables people to be more physically active.

Funded projects include a new foot/cycle path at Neigh Bridge that is largely complete, with outstanding issues still being pursued with Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) in liaison with the Cotswold Lakes Trust. Work is ongoing to deliver 52 new cycle stands, with 51 already installed in locations in Lechlade, Fairford and South Cerney. Plans are in place for additional stands in those locations and more are being investigated.

A new section of bridleway under Wildmoor Lane has been commissioned and will be delivered by GCC Rights of Way team following an agreement from the landowner to dedicate the required land.

The on-going objective to deliver a crossing on the Spine Road is still seen as a critical project and efforts are focused on maintaining the momentum gained on key steps already achieved. After prior discussions between GCC and Cotswold District Council Officers to determine the next steps. GCC has been undertaking a peer review of the Sustrans proposals and funding has been allocated from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) for design work. Funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is being considered for the delivery phase.

Work is also under way to agree a Memorandum of Understanding with Wiltshire Council regarding both Cotswold and Wiltshire Council's approach to local plan policy development, which takes a holistic approach to the Water Park area.

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. 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 has received approval from both Planning and the Structural Engineer with work planned on

site in May. 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.



## Delivering Housing

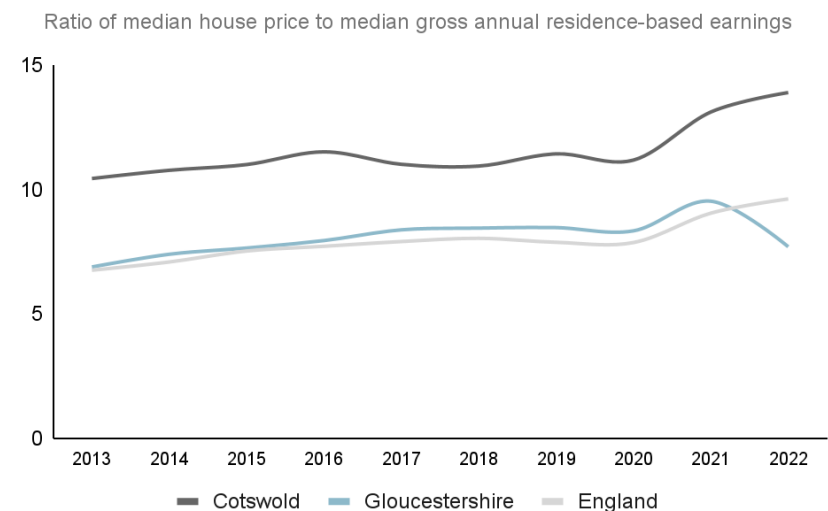


### The Context

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. There have been considerable delays whilst terms for the lease are agreed, however it is anticipated the lease will be finalised this quarter.

The Council and Bromford are continuing to work in partnership to deliver carbon zero affordable homes on the Down Ampney site and formally entered into a Collaboration Agreement in November 2022. A communication strategy has been developed to ensure appropriate engagement with all stakeholders, including the Parish Council and local residents and people. A planned programme of consultation commenced on 10 October 2022 and a second round of consultation to share the detailed designs, house types and layouts took place in March, ahead of a planning application being submitted. It has previously been highlighted that the Planning application would be affected by the Habitat Regulations Assessment requirements as the site is within the Zone of Influence for North Meadow, Cricklade. This means the Planning application could not be determined until a Mitigation Strategy was in place. Swindon Borough Council have now completed the mitigation strategy, so applications in the affected area can now be processed. Delays in submitting the Planning Application arose due to concerns raised during the public consultation regarding drainage issues. Initial drainage designs were rejected by Bromford Housing Association as they were deemed non-adoptable. Although revised designs have been agreed upon, this setback caused the Council to miss the submission deadline before the new Biodiversity Net Gain regulations took effect. Despite this, the Ecological Appraisal has been finalised, with the full report anticipated by the end of April. While it's anticipated that the site may not be large enough to meet the required offset, alternative options such as tree planting on other Council-owned sites or a financial contribution are under review. Importantly, these additional considerations won't impede the planning submission, which is still on track for completion before the end of May.

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. The Council therefore put out a 'Call for Interest' at the start of March to attract a new partner who could bring forward funding and development proposals. The Council is engaging with interested parties and will bring the 'Call for Interest' to a close on 25th April. Opportunities and future options for the buildings will then be reviewed and a report submitted to Cabinet in June. In the meantime, funding agreed at Council in February, will enable structural repairs to be made to the unstable wall at the Old Station. Works should commence at the end of April.

The Stockwells regeneration scheme is being delivered by Bromford Housing Association and represents an opportunity for the Council and Bromford to create the first social rented, Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) net zero homes within the District. With funding support from the Council, Air Source Heat Pumps will

replace traditional gas boilers, reducing CO2 emissions from heating and hot water by around 80%. In addition, the introduction of a large solar PV system will reduce the net carbon emissions of the development to zero. Developers started on site in Q2 2022-23; however, following serious setback due to the insolvency of the main contractor, it was feared that the scheme may be delayed by many months. However in March this year Members were invited to attend the Grand Opening of the scheme and the 27 homes were counted towards the Council's annual housing target. Residents moved in during March this year and benefit from the modern construction and commitment to low running costs, going some way to meet the council's aim to tackle fuel poverty in the district.

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. This scheme is slightly ahead of schedule currently, with the handover of all 15 homes due in April 2024. The scheme has met with an on-site delay due the failure on the part of the Water Utility to complete connection as per contracted, this is outside the control of either the housing association or the council. It is now envisaged that the scheme will be handed over during mid to late Quarter 1. on track in terms of the environmental sustainability standards and the developer is targeting an EPC A rating, which, if achieved, would be in excess of the agreed standard. Funding for the start on site stage has been paid to Cottsway by CDC in line with the grant agreement.

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. The housing association building out these homes on behalf of GRHA is advising an 8 week delay due torrential rain earlier in the year interfering with the ground works programme. Therefore, the new homes ought to hand over in late Q1.

## 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 leisure management options appraisal, including the Corinium Museum, was completed to determine the most suitable delivery model, contract scope and contract terms for the Council's leisure facilities for when the previous contract expired on 31 July 2023. The procurement process to appoint a new external Leisure and Culture Management Contractor is complete and the new contract with Freedom Leisure commenced 1 August 2023. A report on the progress of Active Cotswold and contract mobilisation was presented to Overview and Scrutiny on 30th January 2024.

The Council was awarded £162,500 by the Government to assist with installing Changing Places toilets in locations across the District. The toilets are larger and accessible to people who cannot use standard accessible toilets, with equipment such as hoists, curtains, adult-sized changing benches, and space for carers. The venues in our bid were Cirencester Abbey Grounds, Birdland at Bourton-on-the-Water, the Cotswold Country Park and Beach at South Cerney and Cotswold Farm Park at Guiting Power. The Changing Places Toilet Facilities are complete at Cotswold Farm Park and Abbey Grounds, Cirencester and Birdland. Cotswold Country Park and Beach is in the planning and procurement stages and will be delivered later this year.

The spring round of Crowdfund Cotswold launched in February, with a deadline for applications of 24th April. There has been strong interest from prospective projects, with over 20 people attending our workshop. The remaining projects from the autumn round met their targets, including the biggest project to date, a multiuser astro turf pitch in Bourton on the Water. Following some initial delays to verification, a project from World Jungle for a mobile youth festival to complement their well established programme of activity for young people launched in quarter and quickly met its circa £30,000 target.

During the Easter Holidays, the Council, in partnership with World Jungle, executed the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme for children on Free School Meals in the Cotswold district, resulting in 441 children booking a total of 610 activities. While some activities were open to all schoolchildren, 63% of the available slots were filled by those on Free School Meals. Emphasising inclusivity, 6% of attending children had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), 9% were Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) children, and 18% were from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community. Providers reserved spots for children with special needs, offering additional support and pre-session familiarisation, enhancing their experience. To engage teenagers, a Youth Pass was offered, with 46 young people participating, providing transport options.

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. In Q4, three existing champions underwent refresher training, while seven new champions were trained.

Cotswold relaunched the 'Safe Places' scheme in partnership with the Police, with 13 venues in Cirencester signed up to offer a safe haven to vulnerable individuals. Plans to expand the scheme to other areas are underway, with venues listed on the Safe Places app for easy access.

The Community Wellbeing Team continued to organise and support 'Getting Connected' courses to enhance digital inclusion. Over 60 older adults benefited from these courses, fostering connections and reducing isolation. Additionally, the 'DIGI DAY' project is planned for 2024, providing expert advice on digital topics for the community.

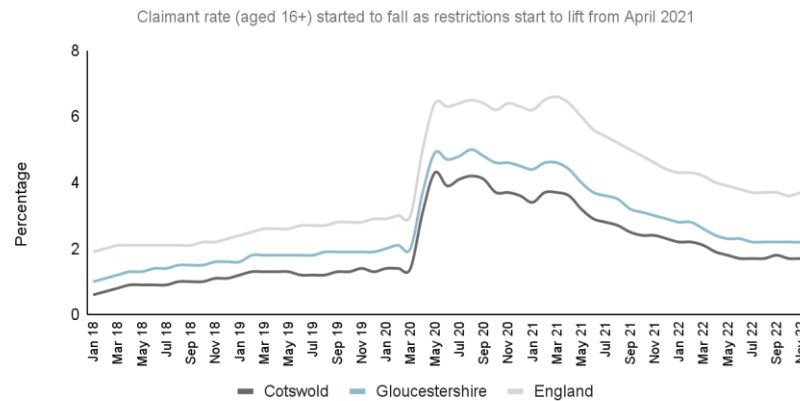
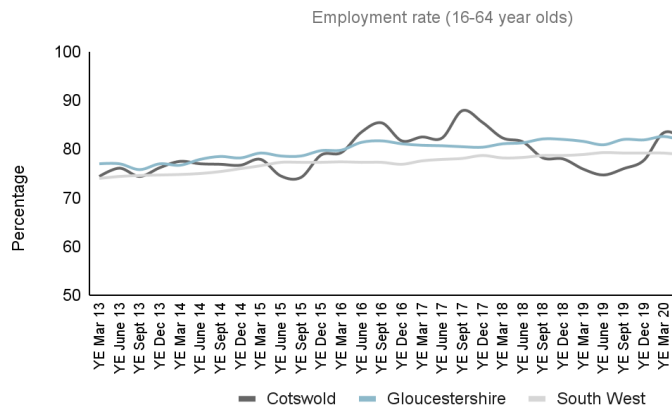
Collaborating with Chesterton Primary School and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the council initiated the successful 'DIG DAY' event, leading to the formation of a gardening after-school club. This initiative not only engaged local families but also encouraged children to participate in community-building activities.

# Supporting the Economy



## The Context

The District supports an economically active population of around 47,100 and has strengths in finance and business services, ICT including science and technology, retail, and accommodation and food services. Around 90% of businesses are small enterprises 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 unrest in the Middle East. Sharply rising prices, particularly for energy and fuel, have had an impact on disposable income and living standards. Although energy and fuel costs have dropped back, and the overall inflation rate has fallen significantly, prices overall are still higher than prior to the invasion and food inflation continues to run at a relatively high level.



Source: ONS, Annual Population Survey

Source: ONS, Crown Copyright Reserved (Nomis)

Businesses within the visitor economy, particularly within hospitality, continue to face a particularly challenging scenario: increases in wage costs – not only to recruit and retain staff amid continuing labour shortages, but also with the increase in the minimum wage; significant, continuing increases in costs, particularly for food and drink purchases; and all against the backdrop of a continued squeeze on customer spending. The rising cost of living has impacted consumer behaviour and spending with shorter staying trips, less day trips and an increased interest in cheaper or free options for things to do.

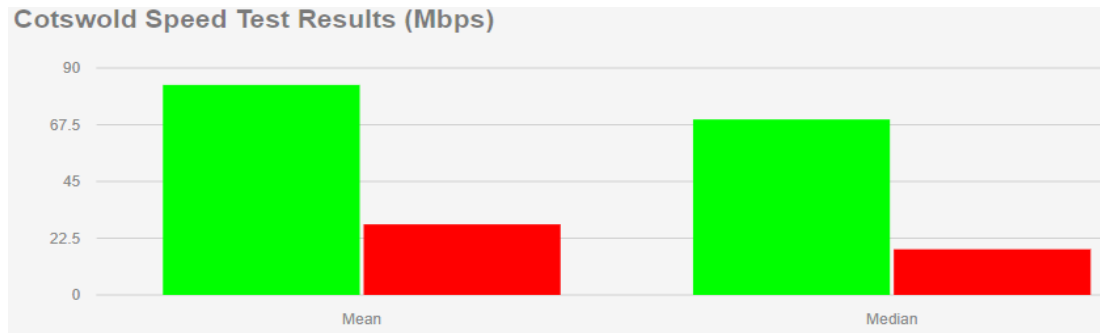
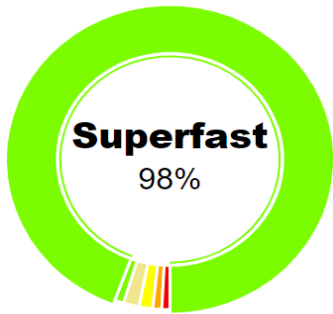
Most visitor economy businesses have seen a relatively positive start to 2024, reporting ahead of the equivalent period in 2023: consumer demand has been stronger than anticipated and other business pressures – particularly recruitment issues and increasing costs – have eased somewhat.

However, due to the cost-of-living crisis, VisitBritain's domestic sentiment research shows most UK adults (66%) are either 'cautious and being very careful' or have been 'hit hard and are cutting back' (22%). The silver lining from this, for domestic tourism, is that 35% of respondents said that as a result they were more likely to choose a domestic rather than overseas trip. An improvement in the weather would undoubtedly have a positive impact: one of the top barriers to taking overnight trips is the UK weather (32% of respondents).

The number of job postings remains high, reflecting continuing challenges in recruitment, but have fallen back from their 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 scheme started in the Forest of Dean but is likely to be extended to the east of the county, including parts of Cotswold District, in June 2024. 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 is due to be considered by the County Council's Cabinet and the new City Region Board, in June 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 St James's Place offices and received a presentation about the company's work with apprenticeships and financial education.

In 2022, the Council was awarded £1 million over three years from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund 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 largely 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 Navigator for the outreach programme will use 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. 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. There is only a relatively small amount of UKSPF funding to be allocated and an open application process is being run until 17th May.

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. Three grants for village halls have been approved and there is a rolling programme of applications for the remaining funding. 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 important from both an economic and civic pride perspective. The number of vacant town centre retail units is a measure of a town centre's health and how the Council is meeting its objective of helping town centres to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. A survey undertaken in August 2021 showed Cirencester had a town centre vacancy rate of 11%, three percentage points below the national average. The vacancy rate improved further in April 2022 to just under 6% and in October 2022 to just under 5%. The latest count at the beginning of April 2024 showed the vacancy rate at 5.1%, with a number of the remaining units either under offer or undergoing refurbishment. The longest-standing vacant building, the former House of Fraser on the Market Place, has now been let to the Grace Network. Work is underway and the building is expected to be occupied in June 2024. The smaller towns within the District generally have lower vacancy rates, although the vacancies in Tetbury and Moreton-in-Marsh have increased slightly in recent times. Neither of these are of concern at this time, although we need to be mindful of the pace of change on the high street and the potential impact of the cost of living crisis and we will continue to monitor closely. In some of the smaller towns, a loss of retail space to residential is of more concern as it can affect the town's 'critical mass' and therefore its ability to attract visitors.

Since the closure of the privately owned coach park in Bourton on the Water, there has been no official coach parking provision in the village. Local stakeholders are still trying to find a viable alternative and Cotswolds Tourism have been communicating the situation to tour operators and interested parties.

Led by Cotswolds Tourism, the Cotswolds Plus Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) – one of 33 nationally accredited LVEPs – has been working to improve co-ordination of regional activity. Cotswolds Tourism have made several successful linked bids for UKSPF and Rural England Fund to councils across the Cotswolds. Preparatory work has now started on the projects which cover a number of separate areas of business support: developing engaging new experiences; marketing new and existing experiences online; helping businesses make their practices more sustainable; building local connections between

accommodation providers and local suppliers and service provider; and significant website enhancements for the main tourism website, Cotswolds.com, which will include a new business support area.

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 Triangle/University Gate site. The Council's Chief Executive, the Cabinet Member for Economy, the Business Manager for Localities and the Economic Development Lead have held a number of meetings with the new Vice Chancellor, Chief Operating Officer and Director of External Relations at the RAU. The RAU has come 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, a conference centre, hotel 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 the next two years. The project management resource has now been in place for some time. 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.
- 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 recently 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 moving to the more visible phase of activity. Last year Kier and National Highways presented to a meeting of the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group. National Highways is looking to restart the A417 Business Forum, which will give local businesses the opportunity to be engaged with the project.