

Green Economic Growth Strategy 2025-2029

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION



COTSWOLD
District Council

Introduction

Cotswold District Council's Green Economic Growth Strategy was adopted in December 2020 following a period of public consultation. Prior to this, an economic strategy had not been in place for some time. The strategy covered a four-year period, which will expire in December 2024.

The strategy was written at a time when the country was still facing pandemic-related restrictions and was designed to help the local economy recover from the economic impact of Covid. The strategy served that purpose well and is, to a large extent, still relevant today. Nonetheless, a good deal of the global context has changed since 2020 and it is appropriate to refresh the strategy to bring it fully up to date.

The vision for the 2020 strategy was “to nurture a dynamic, vibrant and balanced economy in the Cotswold District, growing high value, highly-skilled, low environmental impact businesses in our district... and enhancing the opportunities available for local people, particularly young people.” That vision is still our goal today.

Our successes, working collaboratively, since 2020 include:

- Media coverage of the Cotswolds as a place to do business has improved. The area is well-known as a tourist destination, with its beautiful towns and villages and rolling hills, but is less well-known for its many innovative and successful businesses. That is now changing – the Cotswolds has been acknowledged as a high investment destination for agritech, digital and zero carbon aviation.
- Central government funding has been secured, ranging from £160,000 to support town centres to £1 million from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, £764,292 from the Rural England Prosperity Fund and £162,500 to install Changing Places toilets at four locations in the district.
- Town Centres have proved resilient despite a very difficult climate, with the vacancy rate in Cirencester falling from 11% in August 2021 to less than 5% at the last count in October 2024. Vacancy rates remain low in all our other town centres.
- The former Mitsubishi UK headquarters at Watermoor in Cirencester have been successfully repurposed as serviced offices and storage known as Watermoor Point. The site is now home to almost 100 organisations and supports nearly 700 employees. The success of Watermoor Point has shown that transition can be achieved at scale and with speed and that there is active demand for quality business space from new and expanding businesses. The District Council is looking to add to the stock of space by letting its excess office accommodation at Trinity Road in Cirencester.
- The Royal Agricultural University has launched its £100 million plus Innovation Village project on its Cirencester campus with active support from key stakeholders. An outline planning application has now been submitted to the District Council.
- The Cotswold Economic Advisory Group has been established, bringing together key stakeholders in the local economy to advise the Council on delivery of its Green Economic Growth Strategy. The Group has provided a valuable source of advice and challenge, as well as connecting key local partners to have conversations and forge links that otherwise may not have happened and proving influential at a county level through links with GFirst (now integrated within Gloucestershire County Council). The Group has explored a variety of important topics ranging from skills and young people to Net Zero to the A417 Missing Link project.

We look forward to working with our partners to build on this success and tackle new challenges over the period of this strategy.

Tristan Wilkinson
Cabinet Member for the
Economy & Environment



What has changed since the Green Economic Growth Strategy was adopted in December 2020?

- A new UK government has come into power with a new set of policies designed to deliver economic growth.
- The Covid pandemic has had many lasting effects including on consumer behaviour and working patterns.
- The impact of Brexit has become clearer, particularly in relation to difficulties in trading with Europe for smaller businesses.
- The cost-of-living crisis, with higher fuel bills as well as food inflation and higher mortgage rates and rents, has impacted on disposable income.
- Businesses generally have seen higher costs, including fuel prices and labour costs have had a major impact on businesses, which cannot always be passed onto the customer. The construction sector has seen costs rise significantly which has an impact in the wider economy.
- The transition to a digital-based economy has increased, both in terms of consumer behaviour and working patterns.
- Recruitment has become a greater challenge as many people withdrew from the labour market - either foreign workers returning home or more mature people deciding to retire early.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already here in some forms and its influence and potential are developing fast. AI is both a major opportunity and a risk for business. The world has become increasingly unstable and although conflicts may seem a long distance away, their impact can be felt at home, both through higher prices as a result of the disruption caused by the wars and by the increased risk of cyber attacks from hostile states.
- Food security and agricultural sustainability are acknowledged as significant longer-term risks - how do we feed the nation at the same time as protecting soil quality, dealing with natural phenomena such as flooding and meeting demand for land for other uses including housing and renewable energy?
- The effects of climate change have become even more tangible, with more regular flooding and changes to seasonal weather patterns, which has implications for business. Business has a big role to play in meeting the legal requirement for net zero. There are opportunities for business in the green economy by responding to the global challenge of climate change at a local level.



Executive summary

Cotswold District Council's Green Economic Growth Strategy was adopted in December 2020 for a four-year period, so an updated strategy is needed to take its place. While much of the strategy remains relevant today, a good deal of the global and indeed national context has changed.

The Gloucestershire Economic Strategy, adopted in May 2024, provides much of the local context, so that has not been repeated in detail in this document, which instead concentrates on more local-level actions, including specific projects and sites.

The Green Economic Growth Strategy has guided the work of the Council's Economic Development function over the last four years and has been overseen by the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group. The new strategy will direct the Council's work in this area over the coming years.

Many of the actions will need to be delivered in partnership. This has proved to be the most effective approach in light of limited capacity within the Council itself and also because, for example, many of the key employment sites are not in the Council's ownership, so its role is to enable and facilitate others to achieve their ambitions.

The Cotswold economy performs well by most measures, but there is no room for complacency – there are many opportunities that the Council wishes to see realised for the benefit of local people. The Royal Agricultural University's Innovation Village, the Centre for Sustainable Aviation at Cotswold Airport at the Centre for National Resilience at the Fire Service College in Moreton-in-Marsh are just three of them.

Key issues facing the local economy over the next few years will include retaining and developing talent in the area, as well as bringing more people back into the labour market to help address recruitment and skills issues. Improving transport in the district and promoting apprenticeships and other training options are central to achieving this ambition.

Promoting sustainable tourism, helping our town centres to continue to evolve and supporting business to work towards net zero and understand the opportunities and risks associated with Artificial Intelligence are also important challenges to address.

The Council will endeavour to secure external funding wherever possible and to take advantage of opportunities when they arise.



Cllr Tony Dale visiting Cotswold Steel Stockholders near Tetbury

Policy Context

National

In recent years, the previous Government's focus has been on 'Levelling Up' - aiming to reduce the imbalances, primarily economic, between areas across the UK. Although a worthy ambition, it has not been necessarily that helpful for the Cotswold District which is seen, with some justification, as a relatively affluent area - albeit with some pockets of deprivation. For the purposes of the Levelling Up Fund, Cotswold was classed as a 'Level 3' area (i.e. the lowest priority). The Council did not submit bids to rounds one and two, as no projects were 'shovel ready', and could not apply for round three as the Government did not open up a competitive process. That said, the Council has received £1 million from the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund over three years (2022-23 to 2024/25) and £764,292 from the Rural England Prosperity Fund over two years (2023-24 and 2024-25), both of which form part of the wider Levelling Up agenda. These are covered in more detail later in this document.

Following the general election of July 2024, a new Labour government was elected on a manifesto pledge to "kickstart economic growth" by "strengthening our economic institutions and giving investors the certainty they need to fuel growth". Further detail on economy-related programmes is expected in the coming months.

Setting clear priorities in this document is helpful when it comes to submitting funding bids and the Council will closely monitor where projects in the district can help the Government to meet national priorities, with the aim of securing funding - for example for the Royal Agricultural University Innovation Village.

Due to boundary changes, there are now two Members of Parliament serving the Cotswold District - Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Conservative) in the North Cotswolds and Dr Roz Savage (Liberal Democrat) covering the South Cotswolds. Close working with our Members of Parliament will be important to ensure the voice of the Cotswold economy is heard at a national level.

Regional

Western Gateway - Gloucestershire is part of the Western Gateway, the pan-regional partnership for South Wales and Western England, which runs from Swindon to St Davids in Pembrokeshire. It works on a number of different themes, ranging from net zero to transport and innovation to investment, with the aim of "powering a greener, fairer future for our area and the UK".

County

The Gloucestershire Economic Strategy was adopted in May 2024 following approval by the Gloucestershire County Council Cabinet. The strategy has been developed by the County Council in partnership with GFirst Local Enterprise Partnership. GFirst has now been integrated into a new 'Growth and Enterprise Team' in the County Council.

The adopted strategy uses the tagline "Driven by innovation, built on heritage".

There are four strategic priorities in the strategy:

- **Sustainable Growth**
- **Inward Investment**
- **Employment and Skills**
- **Business Innovation and Support**

The strategic priorities are supported by two cross-cutting themes:

- **Greener Gloucestershire and Inclusive Gloucestershire**

The document also sets out a longer-term economic vision for the county until 2050.

“By 2050, Gloucestershire will be a hub for the UK’s intelligence, security, and cyber agencies. We will be a centre for world-leading, sustainable businesses in the cutting edge industries of digital communications, advanced manufacturing, agri-tech, and green and nuclear energy, while preserving our rich cultural and natural heritage. Gloucestershire will build on its strength as a prominent location in western England with ease of access to regional hubs in, and beyond, the Western Gateway. We will sustain our unique mix of nationally important rural landscapes and vibrant urban centres by delivering a stronger, more sustainable economy that benefits the whole county.”



The Gloucestershire Economic Strategy is overseen by the new Gloucestershire City Region Board, on which the council is represented.

District

The administration at Cotswold District Council was elected in 2019. A post of Economic Development Lead was created in 2020 to deliver the Council’s priorities around growing the local economy. A ‘Green Economic Growth Strategy’ was adopted in December 2020 following a period of consultation and a priority to ‘Enable A Vibrant Economy’ was included in the Council’s Corporate Plan adopted in 2021.

The Liberal Democrat administration was re-elected in May 2023 with an increased majority and has confirmed its commitment to and approach to growing the Cotswold economy is unchanged. ‘Supporting the Economy’ remains a priority in the Council’s Corporate Plan 2024-28.

The District Council is in the process of reviewing its Local Plan, which sets out where development will take place in the district. In terms of the economy and employment, the plan seeks to:

- a. Support the local economy and enable the creation of more high-quality jobs in the District, which help young people to have rewarding careers locally.
- b. Encourage the vitality and viability of town and village centres as places for shopping, work, leisure, cultural and community activities, including maintaining Cirencester’s key employment and service role.
- c. Support sustainable tourism in ways that enable the District to act as a tourist destination which spreads the benefits of tourism throughout the District rather than being concentrated in ‘honeypot’ areas.

Economic health dashboard

By most measures, the Cotswold economy performs well. Here are a few of the key indicators:

Claimant count – 2.0% (1030 people) – the lowest in the county, compared with the Gloucestershire average of 2.8%, the South West average of 2.9% and the UK average of 4.3%.

Job postings – in June 2024, Cotswold district had 1941 unique job postings – double the number of people looking for work.

Gross value added – The size of the Cotswold economy

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
£million	3,888	3539	3750	4109

Number of businesses – births/deaths/micro businesses

	2021	2022
Business births	560	470
Business deaths	540	570
Active enterprises	5945	5875

This slight decline follows the Covid pandemic and will continue to be monitored as more recent information becomes available.

Apprenticeships

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Starts	380	440	410	310
Achievements	190	160	190	150

Town centre vacancies – Across the district the average town centre vacancy rate is 4.8%, compared with the national average of 14%.

Broadband coverage – The figure for superfast broadband (30bmps and above) is 98.3% and for full fibre is 65.6%. This is broadly in line with the national average but better than many rural areas.

Footfall – Footfall, defined as the number of people entering an area during a given time, has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels across all of our market towns. Until recently, the Council has subscribed to the Town and Place AI footfall platform, which is measured using mobile phone location data, which has enabled us to track the recovery. It should be noted that the figures do not discriminate between residents and visitors.

These measures will continue to be monitored as measures of the health of the local economy.

Key Local Assets

Cotswold Lakes – Known for many years as the Cotswold Water Park, the Cotswold Lakes area covers some 42 square miles, falling into both Cotswold District and Wiltshire Council areas. It is made up of 80 lakes, formed from historic gravel extraction. The area has an important conservation role and part of it has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is home to a significant number of leisure businesses, to a number of holiday park sites and other accommodation and to some important businesses, including Bosch Rexroth and Hercules Site Services.

The decision to rebrand the area from the Cotswold Water Park to Cotswold Lakes, to better reflect the offering of the area, was endorsed by the Council in July 2024, but it is acknowledged that it will be a gradual process.

Cotswold Airport – The airport, based near the village of Kemble, is the largest privately-owned airport in the UK and is home to a significant number of businesses. In particular it has a clustering of businesses in the sustainable aviation sector, including ZeroAvia, Vertical Aerospace, S&C Thermofluids and Air Salvage International. There is an aspiration by the Airport, supported by key partners, to build upon this clustering to become a ‘Centre for Sustainable Aviation’.

Fire Service College – The Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh is the biggest provider of fire training in the UK and trains firefighters from across the world. The wider site has now been renamed the ‘Capita Centre for National Resilience’ to reflect its broader role. There are a number of other businesses and organisations in related areas who have a presence on the site, including the Fire Protection Association and National Highways. There is an opportunity to increase the importance and economic value of the site by attracting other businesses in the resilience field.

Paddleboarders at the Cotswold Lakes





The Royal Agricultural University (RAU) – The RAU, based on the edge of Cirencester, is one of the UK’s leading land-based universities and is the oldest agricultural college in the English-speaking world. It has a vision to be the UK’s global university for sustainable farming and land management. The university is also one of the UK’s smallest, with around 1200 students. It is investing in its campus facilities with new £5.8 teaching labs due to open in March 2025. In a highly competitive HE sector the RAU’s potential for significant growth in UK and international student numbers is somewhat constrained by the shortage and cost of housing for students in the surrounding area.

The RAU’s strategy is not only to recruit students to study at its Cirencester campus but to also grow in different ways. It has created international links with China, Sharjah and Uzbekistan. The University has also launched its Innovation Village project on land at its Cirencester campus, with a vision “a vibrant home to a community of entrepreneurs, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, committed to addressing the major global challenges we all face including climate change, sustainable land use and food production, biodiversity loss, and heritage management.”

Situated in the grounds of the Royal Agricultural University, The Alliston Centre is the home of Farm491, the RAU’s technology and innovation space focused on the future of farming and food systems, and The Growth Hub Cirencester, part of the wider Growth Hub Gloucestershire network and a business hub focused on launching, growing and scale businesses in the Cotswolds.

Farm491 supports AgriTech, AgriFood and farming entrepreneurs in the UK and internationally in converting their ideas or

technological solutions into viable and successful businesses, while The Growth Hub Cirencester provides fully funded business support, including green consultancy, and free knowledge exchange events and workshops to pre-startups, startups, sole traders and small to medium size businesses in the Cotswold District, as well as offer co-working, meeting room and office hire.

Cirencester College – Based on the edge of Cirencester, near the RAU, the College is one of the biggest sixth form colleges in the region with around 3000 students. Its site on the edge of Cirencester has developed significantly in recent years, with the opening of the Applied Digital Skills Centre and T-Level building and additional student amenity areas. It plays a leading role in equipping the future workforce of the area.

RAF Fairford – This US Air Force base is a major employer and undoubtedly has a significant economic impact, both through its core purpose and as the home of the Royal International Air Tattoo. In recent years, certain US Air Force functions have transferred to the base and, as a result, it has seen a significant investment in facilities on the site, running into tens of millions of pounds.

Campden BRI – Campden BRI is a membership-based food innovation and research organisation based in Chipping Campden. It is a major employer, with around 300 employees on-site. It is a major employer, with around 300 employees on-site and other facilities in Leamington Spa and Budapest. It has over 2500 members in 80 countries. It provides the food and drink industry with practical scientific, technical and advisory services to ensure product safety and quality, process efficiency and product and process innovation.

Top Local Companies - Measured on turnover.

Source: SoGlos Top 100 Business in Gloucestershire 2023.

St James's Place (Cirencester) - Wealth management
Masstock Arable (Andoversford) - Agricultural systems
Nuvias Global (South Cerney) - IT
Sodra Wood (Cirencester) - Timber importing
Corin Medical (Cirencester) - Orthopaedics manufacturing
Procurri Europe (Cirencester) - IT
Daylesford (nr Moreton in Marsh) - Food, retail and tourism
Pegasus Group (Cirencester) - Planning consultants
National Star (Ullenwood) - Specialist education
Shipton Mill (Tetbury) - Flour mill
Kubus Group (Kemble) - IT
Lodge Service International (Cirencester) - Security
Socomec (South Cerney) - Electrical engineering
PBShop (Fairford) - Online book shop

Key Partners

As a small district council, our economic development function is limited. It is therefore vital to work with other partners to maximise the impact of the Council's finite resources – both by bringing in external funding and influencing how others deploy their investment.

In early 2021, the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group was established to provide guidance and oversight on the delivery of the Green Economic Growth Strategy. Membership of the group includes representatives:

Campden BRI, Cirencester Chamber of Commerce, Cirencester College, Cotswold Airport, Gloucestershire County Council, Growth Hub, Fairford and Lechlade Business Group, Federation of Small Business, Fire Service College, Royal Agricultural University, St James's Place plc, Studee, Watermoor Point.

Other key partners include town and parish councils, Gigaclear, Openreach, other businesses and third sector organisations.



The offices of St James's Place plc – the district's largest employer

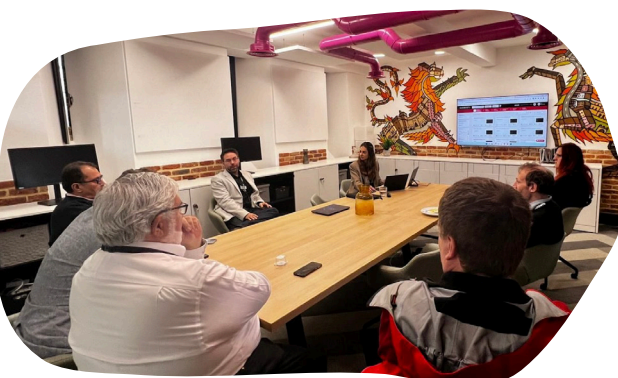
Key Sectors



Agricultural Sustainability – The Cotswold District is an agricultural area, with hundreds of farms of various types and sizes. The presence of the Royal Agricultural University underlines the importance of farming to the area. In the previous strategy, ‘agritech’ was highlighted as a key growth sector. This remains the case, but the focus has been widened to ‘agricultural sustainability’, encompassing climate change and food security, albeit some of the solutions to these challenges will be found through the use of technology.

Farm491, an agritech incubator based at the Alliston Centre on the RAU Campus is an important resource in this regard and the development of the RAU Innovation Village will build upon its success.

Cyber/Digital - There are more cyber and digital businesses in the Cotswolds than many people appreciate. Much of the focus around cyber security is inevitably on Cheltenham because of GCHQ and the development of the Golden Valley cyber park. However, the Cotswolds is home to a number of leading-edge digital businesses, including Anya Health, Neon Play, Beam Connectivity, Studee.com and Core to Cloud. Remote working means that recruitment in this sector is drawn from a wide talent pool and the quality of life in the Cotswolds makes the area an attractive base.



Net Zero High Growth – Responding to the climate crisis is one of the Council’s top priorities. It is right that business should play its part in the journey to Net Zero.

The district already has some high-profile businesses who are tackling some of the challenges of climate change. ZeroAvia is based at Cotswold Airport and is developing a hydrogen powertrain for aviation. Since relocating to Cotswold Airport in 2021, it has grown from 10 staff to around 200. There are other businesses involved in decarbonising aviation who are also based at Cotswold Airport, including Vertical Aerospace, S&C Thermofluids and Air Salvage International.



Cotswold District has a large number of listed buildings, which help to make the charm and attractiveness of many of our towns and villages. However, many of these buildings can be inefficient in terms of energy use. The Council aspires to be an exemplar in the retrofit of historic buildings. The Council is employing a Senior Conservation and Retrofit Officer who will give advice, guidance and training to building owners on the best way to approach such works.

The Council has played a leadership role in climate action through installing electrical vehicle charging points (EVCPs) in its car parks and solar panels on its buildings, as well as promoting agile working to reduce unnecessary travel.

Other (opportunity-based) -

Financial Services – As the home to St James’s Place plc, one of the UK’s biggest wealth managers, with around 1000 employees at their head office in Cirencester, financial services is clearly an important sector for the Cotswold district. The scale of their operation means that SJP are a dominant player in the area, but there are other businesses, including Cirencester Friendly Society and Lumleys Insurance.

Classic Cars – There are a number of businesses in the classic motor industry ranging from the Classic Motor Hub, Windrush Car Storage, South Cerney Engineering and 911 Rennsport, amongst many others. As a relatively affluent area with beautiful countryside, motoring is a popular pastime, leading to the Cotswolds being something of a hub for the classic car sector.

Culture – The Cotswold District has many positive cultural assets, including the Corinium Museum, The Barn Theatre, New Brewery Arts and the Sundial Theatre in Cirencester, the Goods Shed in Tetbury and the Cidermill Theatre in Chipping Campden. Cultural events in the district include the Longborough Festival Opera and the Chipping Campden Music Festival. New events such as the Cirencester History Festival and the Cotswold Homes and Interiors Festival add to the diversity of the offer.

The landscape, along with historic features such as Chedworth Roman Villa and Crickley Hill Iron Age hillfort are all part of the cultural offer.

The Council is in the process of working with partners to put together a Culture Enabling Strategy to encourage a ‘Creative Cotswolds’. The importance of cultural activity in economic terms is recognised, in addition to the health and wellbeing benefits it brings. The Council will have a largely enabling role rather than one of direct delivery.

The Cotswold Homes and Interiors Festival, held at Cirencester’s Corn Hall

Food and Drink – The Cotswolds is known for its local produce, ranging from the Hawkstone, Corinium and Cotswold Lakes breweries, the Daylesford Organic range, Rave and Fire & Flow Coffee, the Poulton Hill, Little Oak and Larkhill vineyards, Trufflehunter and local markets, to name just a few.



Medical Equipment – There are a number of medical-related businesses in the district, including Corin Medical in Cirencester, Summit Medical at Bourton-on-the-Water and Insight Medical at Tetbury.

Homes and Interiors – The Cotswolds is one of the most desirable places to live in the UK and homes in the area have their own unique style. As a result, there are many homes and interiors-related businesses in the area, with some high-profile names like Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen.



SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Internationally-renowned landscape and beautiful towns and villages.
- Local assets like the Royal Agricultural University, Fire Service College, the Cotswold Lakes, Cotswold Airport and RAF Fairford.
- Successful companies like St James's Place, Corin Medical, Bosch Rexroth etc.
- Strong underlying economy.
- Very popular tourist destination.
- Relatively wealthy demographic.
- Digital connectivity, on the whole, is good for a rural area.
- Skilled, well-educated and healthy population linked to a good general quality of life.
- Town centres are performing well.

Weaknesses

- High property price to income multiplier makes housing unaffordable for many.
- Low levels of unemployment means that the labour market is tight and recruitment can be difficult.
- Broadband and mobile phone coverage is limited in a few isolated areas of the district, although improvements are continually being made, and 5G coverage is poor.
- Some parts of the district are poorly connected to the motorway network and there is congestion in some areas e.g. on the Fosse Way.
- Public transport in areas of the district (bus and rail) is poor, making it difficult to get around without a car.
- Lack of EV charging points – although this is being addressed.
- Lack of activities, high housing costs, poor public transport and lack of opportunities mean many young people leave the area.
- Lack of grow-on space for businesses.
- Lack of digital/social media presence amongst small businesses in the area.
- Electricity grid is at capacity in some areas of the district. The cost and time taken to expand capacity acts as a brake on business expansion.

Opportunities

- To grow key sectors like sustainable agriculture, cyber/digital and net zero technologies.
- Available employment land has been allocated and more sites are being identified through the Local Plan Review.
- Cirencester town centre could be the best town centre of its size in the country.
- A417 missing link will improve connectivity when completed.
- Potential for Centre for Sustainable Aviation at Cotswold Airport.
- Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh as a wider Centre for National Resilience.
- Royal Agricultural University's Innovation Village could attract high value businesses.
- New culture events like Cirencester History Festival and Cotswold Homes and Interiors Festival.
- Artificial Intelligence could improve productivity.
- Projects funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund could make a real difference.
- Cultural Strategy for the area could deliver enhanced outcomes.
- Changes to apprenticeship levy rules could make them, and other skills training routes, more attractive for employers. With institutions like Cirencester College, the area is well-placed to promote apprenticeships and T-Levels.

Threats

- Climate Change.
- Perception of the area as relatively wealthy and remoteness of area from the M5 motorway and the 'Central Economic Growth Corridor' (as described in the county economic strategy) could make it more difficult to attract government and other funding.
- Artificial Intelligence could lead to job losses if it replaces functions carried out by workers.
- Poor transport infrastructure in some parts of the district e.g. A429 is effectively a Roman road and there are only two railway stations – at Kemble and Moreton-in-Marsh.

Other topics

Town Centres

Town centres in the Cotswold District play a key role in providing goods and services to local people and visitors and to provide a focal point for events and activities.

Our Town Centres have performed well in the face of changing consumer behaviour and, in particular, the growth of online shopping, not to mention the Covid pandemic. Vacancy levels are low across the district and town centres have a distinctive mix of independent retailers and an attractive environment. As the largest town, Cirencester has seen its vacancy rate drop from 11% in 2021 to around 5% at the time of writing. It is particularly exciting to see the former House of Fraser store on Cirencester's Market Place, which has been empty since early 2019, being brought back into use as a department store for the circular economy operated by social enterprise The Grace Network. This has the potential to be a national exemplar.

It is important, however, not to be complacent in a fast-moving environment. The former Tesco store in the town centre is a large vacant

unit, albeit one where a planning application for a retirement living development has been received. Although the council only has limited influence, through the planning process, this is an opportunity to knit this end of the town centre together. Some areas of the public realm in Cirencester, such as Cricklade Street, are in poor condition and need addressing.

The emerging Cirencester Town Centre Framework Masterplan will help shape the future of the town centre. For more information, see <https://your.cotswold.gov.uk/en-GB/folders/cirencester-tc-masterplan>.

The challenge in smaller town centres is to maintain a critical mass with the loss of some retail units to residential as a result of changes in planning classes – particularly the introduction of Class E, which allows conversion from retail to residential.

Many town centre businesses need support to transact online and to regularly post on and interact with social media in order drive both online and physical footfall.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, visits the Grace Network at the former House of Fraser in Cirencester



Workforce

A well-trained and motivated workforce is critical to business success. Unemployment in Cotswold district rose during the pandemic but has been on a largely downward trajectory since and at the time of writing is at 1.9% - the lowest in the county. Businesses have reported difficulties in recruiting due to a tight labour market and, indeed, this is true for many organisations including the council.

Low levels of unemployment mask the fact that the workforce has shrunk since the pandemic, with many withdrawing from the labour market for health, family or lifestyle reasons.

To avoid continuing difficulties with recruitment, it will be necessary to bring some of this cohort back to the labour market by offering appropriate support and incentives. The Council is, through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, supporting the countywide Employment and Skills Hub Outreach (ESHO) Project, which is designed to address this issue. It is delivered locally by the Churn Project.

In addition, the Council is keen to retain talent in the area by enabling young people to have rewarding careers in the Cotswolds. It is inevitable that some young people will leave the area in search of opportunities in big cities and elsewhere, although many will return later in life. Our objective is to provide opportunities for those who wish to stay and a partnership between business, educational institutions and training providers is key to this.

Apprenticeships have a vital role to play as an alternative to university. Apprenticeships are available in more disciplines than ever before. Major employers like St James's Place run their own successful apprenticeship schemes, but it is acknowledged that the administrative burden of apprenticeships on small businesses can be high and rules around the use of the apprenticeship levy can be complex and restrictive.

The new government set out plans in the King's Speech in July 2024 to reform the Apprenticeship Levy, allowing it to be used on a wider range of training options.

T-Levels provide a mix of college-based study and work placements. T-Levels can provide a pathway into apprenticeships. Securing work placements can be a challenge and the council will encourage employers to offer this opportunity.

The challenge of getting to and from the workplace can be a major limiting factor in matching apprenticeships and candidates.

The Council can play a role in facilitating links between employers, educational institutions and training providers.



Transport and Infrastructure

Getting around a large rural area like the Cotswold district can be challenging unless you have access to a car. Public transport is limited and although cycling and walking are encouraged, it is not always possible over longer distances.

A new innovation is The Robin, a demand-responsive, bookable bus service operated by Gloucestershire County Council. The service is designed to provide transport links from close to people's homes to connect with onward travel or to access services where there is no other transport option. The Robin can be booked by app, website or phone call and now operates across north and south Cotswolds – see <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/transport/the-robin/>.

The A417 Missing Link project is the biggest infrastructure project, not only in the Cotswold District but in the whole county, for a generation. The £460 million project will bring benefits, not only for road safety and reduced congestion but also for the local economy – both for the local supply chain and in shorter journey times, making places along, and at either end of, the route more attractive locations for business. The project is due to complete in 2027.

Gloucestershire County Council's Local Transport Plan 2020-41 (www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/ltp) sets out a number of ambitions for improving transport in the district, including a Sustainable Transport Hub for the North Cotswolds, dealing with pinchpoints on the A429 Fosse Way at Stow-on-the-Wold and Moreton-in-Marsh, enhancing the rail services at Moreton and Kemble Stations and improving the walking and cycling networks between key settlements through the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/lcwip). Funding for many of these projects is as yet unidentified.

There is an aspiration for a better link between Cirencester and Kemble rail station. A study was undertaken by transport consultants ITP in 2023, funded by the Gloucestershire Strategy Economic Development Fund (SEDF). It looked at a number of options but recommended that a shuttle bus service offered the best value for money. The Local Transport Plan also includes an aspiration for a cycle path linking Cirencester with Kemble Station.

The Council will work with the County Council to bring forward transport improvements wherever possible.



The new A417 Missing Link under construction



Autosleepers in Willersey, where motorhomes are manufactured

Inward Investment

Inward investment is reliant on a supply of quality employment sites and premises.

A number of key employment sites have been allocated in the 2018-31 Local Plan, which are at various stages. This includes:

Land at Willersey – Planning consent has been granted for the reconfiguration of the Autosleepers manufacturing facility.

The Steadings, Cirencester - Overall, there is 9 hectares of employment land within this development.

The Fire Service College, Moreton-in-Marsh – There is an employment land allocation on-site which has yet to come forward. In addition, the site has potential to take a wider ‘national resilience’ role, building on the Fire Service College’s heritage.

As an area, land values are high which impacts on bringing sites forward for new development. Our goal is to unlock development on sites which have been allocated but have not yet come forward.

The Council’s Local Plan includes a number of policies relating to economic development and employment, including safeguarding established employment sites and promoting rural diversification.

Broadband coverage

Good quality broadband is vital for businesses and employees to function in the digital age.

Broadband coverage in the Cotswold district has improved significantly in recent years and now stands at over 98% for superfast (greater than 30mbps) and over 65% for full fibre.

Much of the credit for the improvements is due to the Fastershire Project, run over Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, which delivered improvements in areas which would not have been covered by commercial deployment. The project has now been wound up and responsibility transferred to the Government’s Project Gigabit. A contract has been awarded for East Gloucestershire, which will include much of Cotswold district.

Mobile phone coverage

There are areas of the Cotswold district where mobile phone coverage is poor, reflecting the large rural nature of the area. In particular, 5G coverage is amongst the lowest in the country. It could become a real issue in the future as the ‘Internet of Things’ develops and more devices are required to connect to each other, particularly in commercial settings, in the future. More work is needed to understand the potential impact and how coverage can be improved, particularly in key areas of the district.

Attracting external funding

The Council's Economic Development function has been successful in securing and managing various pots of Government funding in recent years.

This has included:

£160,000 from the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund and Welcome Back Fund to support our town centres in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic.

£162,500 to deliver four Changing Places toilet facilities for the severely disabled at Cotswold Farm Park, Cirencester Abbey Ground, Birdland and Cotswold Country Park & Beach.

£1 million over three years (2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25) from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and £764,292 over two years (2023-24 and 2024-25) from the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). At the time of writing, it isn't known whether the UKSPF and REPF will be extended, either in terms of the deadline for delivery of projects or additional funding in future years.

The aims of the UKSPF are to improve pride in places and life chances. The REPF is designed to improve rural productivity and connectivity.

Projects funded by the UKSPF include:

- The repurposing of the former House of Fraser in Cirencester.
- The Gloucestershire Employment and Skills Outreach project to help people into work.
- A net zero exemplar social housing scheme at Down Ampney.
- The Cotswold Homes and Interiors Festival.
- A hospitality training facility at Cirencester College.
- An outreach service provided by the Growth Hub to support businesses in all parts of the district.
- New offices at the Growth Hub/Farm491.
- Various Cotswolds Tourism projects include enhancements to the Cotswolds.com website, training programmes for businesses and the 'Local Connections' project to introduce local businesses as suppliers to accommodation providers.

Projects funded by the REPF include:

- Over £400,000 of grants to businesses in the district, which are match-funded, creating investment and jobs.
- Grants to village halls, community and cultural buildings for improvements, particularly to help them to decarbonise.
- Active travel schemes, including footpath improvements.

We will continue to identify and bid for funding which helps the Council to deliver its objectives.



The opening of the new Changing Places toilets at the Abbey Grounds in Cirencester

Tourism and the Visitor Economy

Tourism and the visitor economy are an important part of the economic landscape of the Cotswold District, accounting for 13% of jobs and over £380 million of business turnover. (2022 figures, South West Research Company).

The visitor economy is supported by the joint tourism team, working as a shared service between Cotswold and West Oxfordshire District Councils. The Tourism Team also operates as Cotswolds Tourism, a local authority-led Destination Management Organisation. Cotswolds Tourism is a membership organisation and provides support to its members through marketing, networking events and training.

All activity undertaken by the joint tourism team is linked to the Destination Management Plan - (www.cotswolds.com/dmp).

The vision for Tourism in the Cotswolds is:

“To ensure that the Cotswolds is a vibrant year-round destination where visitors enjoy high quality, authentic experiences and tourism makes an increasing contribution to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the local economy”.

The vision encapsulates the key challenge and opportunity for the Cotswolds: to fully embrace sustainable tourism, ensuring that the local economy is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable.

Cotswolds Tourism overarching objectives, which are set out in the DMP, are all intimately linked with sustainability: supporting local businesses to achieve sustainable growth; spreading visitor numbers geographically and seasonally; championing the move to digital; striving to maximise the benefits of tourism, while minimising the impacts; and efforts to make the destination more accessible and inclusive.

Cotswolds Tourism also acts as the lead partner for the Cotswolds Plus LVEP (Local Visitor Economy Partnership). Working ‘behind the scenes’ to shape and deliver national strategy and activities, as well as to bring a coordinated approach on key issues such as sustainability, business support and research across the wider Cotswolds area, the partnership includes Cotswolds National Landscape, Marketing Cheltenham, Visit Gloucester, Visit Dean Wye and Gloucestershire County Council. As an official LVEP, Cotswolds Plus has direct links to VisitEngland and VisitBritain, and access to potential national funding sources.

The workplan of Cotswolds Plus consists of seven workstreams, two of which are focused on sustainability: Sustainability – transport and active travel, and Sustainability – business practices and biodiversity. Each workstream has an associated action plan. More details can be found at www.cotswolds.com/lvep



Business Support



CLlr Tony Dale visits Cirencester Growth Hub

The District Council's does not directly provide business support services, other than through Cotswolds Tourism, although it does interact with businesses, not only through its economic development function, but through other services such as planning, licensing and council tax.

The Council has funded the Cirencester Growth Hub in the financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25 through the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and, in particular, to provide an outreach support to businesses across the district.

The Council also issues a monthly newsletter, Business Matters, to a circulation of around 3,500. The newsletter highlights available support, funding opportunities and highlights positive business news in the district.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Council Transformation and Economic Development Lead regularly visit businesses in the district and, where appropriate, share details of visits through social media.

Innovation




There are many innovative businesses in the Cotswold District, ranging from digital businesses to manufacturers. The presence of the Royal Agricultural University contributes to the clustering of agritech-related businesses in the area.

Between 2016 and 2021, businesses in the Cotswold district have been awarded £5.8 million of Innovate UK funding, representing 5% of the Gloucestershire total. Our aim is to increase the proportion of funding secured by Cotswold-based businesses, by raising awareness and identifying businesses who may be in a position to apply.



How we'll work

- Collaboratively – We can't achieve the aims of this strategy on our own. We'll bring all of our partners together – from the County Council Town & Parish Councils, businesses and the Chambers of Commerce to Homes England and the Arts Council and Cotswolds National Landscape.
- Climate – We'll consider the implications on the climate emergency in everything we do.
- Inclusive – Our aim is to ensure all parts of our community benefit from economic growth, with no-one left behind.
- Bold, ambitious and innovative – We will take tough decisions, show strong leadership and do things differently to ensure sustainable growth.
- Openness and transparency – An open culture is vital to ensure trust and confidence in the council.
- Value for money - We will use resources wisely but will invest in the fabric and future of the district.
- Listen, hear, act - We will consult with our residents, businesses and stakeholders to understand their aspirations, to inform our decision making.





Actions

As noted earlier, to be as effective as possible, working collaboratively alongside our key partners is critical. Much of our activity on the economy will be about encouraging and influencing other stakeholders. In some cases, the council will be more involved with the direct delivery of projects (rowing); in others, our role will be about facilitating, enabling and influencing (steering) and in others it will be to signpost, communicate and celebrate success (cheering). The actions below are marked as to whether they represent “rowing  steering  or cheering ”.



Inward Investment

- Support the RAU Innovation Village as it moves forward, particularly with regard to securing external funding and suitable quality occupiers. 
- Support the creation of a Centre for Sustainable Aviation at Cotswold Airport. 
- Support the creation of a Centre for National Resilience at the Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh. 
- Support the delivery of the employment land phases at The Steadings development. 
- Complete the delivery of UKSPF & REPF funded projects.  
- Maintain a monitoring brief for external funding opportunities.  



Business Support

- Continue to issue the Business Matters e-newsletter on a monthly basis. 
- Continue to work with the Growth Hub to offer support to businesses across the district. 
- Work with the Growth Hub and other partners to support businesses to work towards becoming net zero. 
- Work with the Growth Hub and other partners to support businesses to understand the opportunities and risk arising from the development of Artificial Intelligence. 




Retaining talent

- Work with Cirencester College and other partners to identify opportunities for work placements as part of T-Level courses. 
- Work with partners to increase opportunities for apprenticeships in the district, encouraging smaller businesses to see the benefits of running apprenticeship schemes. 


Town Centres

- Work with the developers of the former Tesco site in Cirencester to ensure the development maximises the benefit to and integrates with the town centre. 
- Support town centres throughout the district to evolve in the face of changing consumer behaviour and set up place-based partnerships where needed. 

Infrastructure

- Continue to work with National Highways and Kier to maximise the benefits to the local supply chain of the A417 Missing Link project. 
- Lobby Project Gigabit and the private sector providers to speed up delivery of full fibre broadband in the district. 
- Lobby mobile phone operators to improve mobile phone coverage in the district. 

Innovation

- Promote funding offered by Innovate UK and encourage businesses locally to apply, with the aim of increasing the amount of funding awarded to businesses in the district. 



COTSWOLD
District Council

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