



# COTSWOLD

## District Council

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT

**April - June 2025**

# 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

- The Council received strong feedback from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review, recognising improvements in governance, scrutiny, and service delivery, including the successful completion of Phase 1 of the Publica transition.
- The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Peer Review confirmed improved performance, with the Council no longer at risk of designation. A 13-point action plan is being implemented, including new enforcement processes and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements.
- Council emissions have reduced by 41% since 1990. A new Climate Board has been established to accelerate progress toward the 2030 net-zero target.
- The Renewable Energy Study was endorsed by Cabinet and will inform Local Plan updates and future climate policies.
- The Spring round of Crowdfund Cotswold launched five projects, with strong community engagement, including over 150 pledges for the Phoenix Festival.
- The Summer Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme launched with a new booking system, alongside 14 Strengthening Communities events funded through a £50,000 grant.
- The Cotswold Food Network continues to lead on food sustainability, launching new guides, outreach campaigns, and a venison supply project to support food charities.
- Cirencester town centre vacancy rate improved to 4.8%, with new businesses opening and the former House of Fraser now occupied by Monastery & Co.

## 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

During the quarter, the Council received strong and encouraging feedback from the Local Government Association's Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review. The review team recognised the Council's commitment to improvement, highlighting significant progress since the original 2022 review. Notable achievements included strengthened governance arrangements, a revised and streamlined Constitution, and a well-received councillor induction and training programme. The Overview and Scrutiny function has also been revitalised, now playing a more focused and constructive role in shaping policy and holding decision-makers to account. The successful completion of Phase 1 of the Publica transition, bringing around 70 staff back into the Council, was acknowledged as a major milestone. The review encouraged the Council to take time to reflect on lessons learned before progressing to future phases, ensuring that staff are supported and that the transition continues to align with strategic goals.

In parallel, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Peer Review provided a focused assessment of the Planning Service, identifying both strengths and opportunities for further development. The service was commended for its improved performance, with the Government confirming that the Council is no longer at risk of designation for underperformance. Building on earlier work to improve the pre-application service, validation processes, and communication with applicants, recent efforts have centred on reducing enforcement backlogs and introducing a new online enforcement form. These changes are expected to reduce repeat contact, improve triage, and streamline case handling. The service is also preparing for the delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements, with new processes now live to support this. A comprehensive action plan has been developed to implement the 13 recommendations from the review, covering areas such as internal communication, digital innovation, stakeholder engagement, and financial transparency. Progress will be monitored quarterly by the Cabinet Member and annually by the Planning Committee to ensure continued momentum and accountability.

## Responding to the Climate Emergency



### The Context

The climate crisis, and the related ecology crisis, present an existential threat to all Cotswold district residents, but particularly our young people, and future generations beyond them. There is an urgent imperative to act. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have repeatedly outlined the catastrophic impacts that people and nature will face should the world warm by 2 degrees. They plead to limit global temperature rise through urgent, unprecedented, systemic change to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest. Cotswold District Council's climate strategy set a 2020-2030 timeframe, reflecting the importance of this crucial 'Decade to Make a Difference'. The Council's Climate Emergency Strategy of September 2020 identified the Council's different spheres of influence over carbon emissions. These range from emissions under the council's control (for example emissions produced from its own operations) through to those it can have an influence over by enabling District-wide climate mitigation action. Here below is a summary of actions we are taking in response.

### 'Direct Control' actions

The Council's Climate Emergency Strategy of September 2020 contained a target to make emissions from the Council's own operations net-zero carbon as soon as possible, aiming for an 80% reduction by 2030 against a 1990 baseline, and a 100% reduction by 2045. The Council has been working hard to build the evidence base to be able to assess progress against this target and has now been able to complete the exercise up to FY22-23. The progress report was presented at July 2025 Cabinet. It revealed that to date carbon emissions have reduced 41% against the 1990 baseline year, from 4,700,000 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e in 1990 to 2,763,803 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e in FY22-23. It demonstrates action to date can be seen to have led to tangible results. Cabinet (July 2025) also approved the formation of a Climate Board to enable the Council to turbocharge action towards meeting the Council's 2030 reduction target. Activity to reduce the council's operational carbon emissions continues. An energy audit (using internal staff resource) has been commissioned on the Trinity Road building to identify a portfolio of energy and carbon savings. All councils who own a stake in Ubico are in the process of agreeing to undertake a waste fleet EV transition feasibility study to equip councils' with information on feasibility and cost of transition. This is part of a suite of actions to assess how the waste fleet can be decarbonised in the most cost-effective, carbon-effective and practical manner. A business case has been agreed and an offer has been made to New Brewery Arts for the provision of solar PV.

## **‘Indirect Control’ actions**

Work is progressing with preparing the climate change policies of the partial update of the adopted Local Plan for a final stage of public consultation, ahead of submitting the updated policies to the Secretary of State for examination in public. This work has included consideration of feedback to the previous public consultation on the draft Local Plan, and taking on-board the findings of evidence base studies that inform the policy updates. Part of the work to underpin this has involved the creation of a Renewable Energy Study. This was presented to Cabinet in May. Cabinet resolved to endorse the Renewable Energy Study for use as both part of the evidence base for the review of the Local Plan; and part of the evidence base for future Council policies and procedures in regard to responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergencies. The study contained an assessment of existing and potential renewable energy resources (including a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment) across the district as well as an assessment of current and projected future energy demands and emissions in Cotswold District. It considered renewable energy deployment scenarios and opportunities within Cotswold District alongside the benefits and challenges of renewable energy development in relation to environmental, social and economic impacts on the local area and its assets. A suite of strategic recommendations for renewable energy development was produced alongside specific energy policy recommendations to underpin proposals for policies in the Local Plan review and for future revisions up to 2041, to reflect the district’s net zero ambitions for consideration in the current Local Plan review.

To help building owners and tenants improve the energy efficiency and climate resilience of their buildings, the Local Planning Authority produced some guidance specifically for listed buildings, buildings located in a conservation area and those which are traditionally built. The guidance provides a general introduction to the topic, highlighting key points to consider when considering making energy efficiency and climate adaptation improvements to a building, and to provide guidance about where to go for good quality, independent advice, as well as where to find suitably qualified tradespersons.

## **‘Place Shaping’ actions**

### EV charging infrastructure provision

The Council is working to provide residents without off-street parking with EV charging facilities to enable the uptake of EVs across the District. Plans to install electric vehicle charge points in Council-owned carparks have progressed. The Council have entered into a contract with Connected Kerb for delivery of EVCPs in 4 Council owned car parks in Tetbury, Cirencester, Stow-on-the-Wold and Moreton in Marsh respectively. Installation within these car parks is currently taking place and is due to be completed by September.

### Solar PV support

The Council is also working to enable residents to install solar PV by helping them to understand their options, find a reliable installer and secure a fair price through the Cotswold Home Solar scheme. The scheme continues to be promoted and delivered. As a result of the scheme 27 homes have already installed solar panels, and a further 18 have paid a deposit. Residents are on track to save nearly £450,000 across the district.

### Energy efficiency support

Low carbon retrofit of the District's domestic building stock is an essential component of national emissions reduction but remains a huge challenge. The Council is undertaking significant work in this area. In partnership with all other Gloucestershire authorities, a contractor has been procured to provide a Gloucestershire-wide retrofit support offer for residents. The service launched on the 22nd of January and offers residents the opportunity of a whole house energy efficiency plan, project specification and vetted installer selection as well as an installation management service. In addition, a Cotswold District Retrofit Engagement Officer has been recruited to engage communities directly and provide a series of awareness raising events and bespoke advice between now and September 2025. In March we delivered Drive and Thrive event at the Corn Hall which provided residents with the opportunity to see feel and touch low carbon home technologies. The programme of retrofit engagement events is available to view here <https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/environment/climate-action/retrofit-engagement-scheme/>. We have also reappointed Contractor Severn Wye Energy Agency (SWEA) to deliver free energy efficiency advice service specifically for low-income households via the Warm and Well Scheme until 2027.

### Net zero energy planning

The Council is also working in partnership with other Gloucestershire-based councils on Local Area Energy Planning which is vital to enabling net zero within Cotswold District since it is needed to build the case to District Network Operators for investment and expansion in electricity grid infrastructure. A contractor has been appointed to undertake the first 3 stages (of 7) required for Energy Planning and is currently carrying out stakeholder engagement exercises and energy baselining. In tandem we have launched our engagement with Distribution Network Operators (DNOs)/Distribution System Operators (DSOs), Northern Powergrid (NGED) & Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN), to inform their Distribution Future Energy Scenarios (DFES) 2025 projections to ensure electricity grid infrastructure is adequate to meet our net zero ambitions.

### Transport decarbonisation

Work also continues through Climate Leadership Gloucestershire on delivering the Statement of Shared Intent (SoSI) in which all seven local authorities expressed an ambition to reduce surface transport emissions by 80% by 2030 and to reach net zero by 2050. Gloucestershire councils are strengthening their collaboration regards EV charging infrastructure by considering opportunities for enhanced coordination. Life Cycle have been administering the Take a Stand

scheme in the Cotswolds since 2022, showing the commitment of the council to encourage sustainable travel in the region. With CDC support, 78 cycle parking stands have been installed recently across a number of locations in the Cotswold District.

#### Affordable housing

We are strengthening our partnership with Bromford to ensure existing homes and communities are resilient and ready to respond to the challenges presented by the Climate Emergency.

#### **‘Engaging’ actions**

This remains a very important part of the Council’s overall climate crisis response, and there is much work to do to help build confidence and momentum among all District-wide stakeholders, from staff to residents and from businesses to public sector bodies. We regularly run communication engagement campaigns to encourage behaviour change amongst District stakeholders. For example, in January 2025 a campaign was run to encourage people and showcase the small positive changes that can be made for the environment.

We continue to provide funding for a business net zero engagement support programme. We have also relaunched Crowdfund Cotswolds which supports and enables local communities to invest in carbon reduction technology and activity. Carbon literacy training continues to be rolled out to staff and councillors. We also developed a web resource to communicate to all stakeholders on the work of the council regards climate change. Finally, a District-wide network of individuals and organisations motivated by the climate challenge has been formed, 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 of Cotswold District continues to make it an exceptionally desirable place to live. The area's scenic landscapes, historic towns, and strong sense of place contribute to its enduring appeal. This is reflected in the high proportion of homes owned outright—37.8% compared to the national average of 30.6%—which highlights the District's attractiveness as a location for retirement and second home ownership.

However, this desirability has contributed to significant pressures in the local housing market. As of May 2025, the average property price in Cotswold District was £419,000, which is substantially higher than the UK average of £269,000. While this represents a 5.7% decrease from the previous year, prices remain among the highest in the South West. For first-time buyers, the average price was £323,000, and for mortgage buyers, it was £429,000.

Rental prices have continued to rise. As of June 2025, the average monthly private rent in Cotswold was £1,175, up 1.8% from the previous year. This is slightly below the UK average of £1,344 but still represents a significant burden for many local residents, especially given the lower-than-average local wages. There is a notable shortage of good quality, genuinely affordable rental accommodation across the District.

Affordable housing plays a critical role in addressing local housing needs and encompasses both low-cost home ownership options and rental properties typically offered at around 80% of market rent. However, even these discounted rates may remain unaffordable for many households, particularly those on lower incomes or with limited access to financial support.

Social rented housing, which is offered at lower rents than affordable rent, provides a vital safety net for residents on the lowest incomes or those in receipt of full Housing Benefit. These homes are essential in ensuring that the most vulnerable members of the community have access to secure and stable housing.

The combination of relatively high house prices, rising rents, and lower-than-average local earnings creates a significant and persistent challenge around housing affordability. This issue is being further exacerbated by the broader cost of living crisis, which is reducing disposable incomes and increasing financial insecurity for many households.

Adding to the pressure, the government's revised standard methodology now requires Cotswold District to deliver 1,036 homes per year, more than double the previous target. However, the District currently only has a 1.8-year housing land supply, well below the five-year requirement. This shortfall is likely to increase demand and competition for housing, further intensifying affordability challenges.

## **Actions we are taking**

The Council's Affordable Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan, adopted by Cabinet on 8 February 2021, sets out a clear framework for accelerating the provision of social rented and affordable homes for local people. The current focus remains on facilitating affordable housing delivery through the Local Plan, rural exception sites, and community-led housing initiatives. The Council continues to work closely with Housing Associations to maximise delivery and is committed to going further by enabling and directly intervening in the market—potentially through the provision of land and funding.

In line with the Council's Climate Change emergency commitment, any development acquired or built by the Council must be carbon zero. While this requirement increases upfront costs, it significantly reduces ongoing revenue costs for tenants, particularly through lower energy bills.

Following the outcomes of the councillor workshop in October 2020, discussions with local Registered Providers (RPs), and a review of delivery options, Officers recommended the establishment of a formal partnership with a lead RP. This has led to the development of a Partnership Framework with Bromford, aimed at increasing affordable housing delivery across both new-build and regeneration sites. Engagement is also underway with Homes England to explore a package of measures to improve the potential for rural affordable housing delivery in the District. A pipeline of approximately eight rural affordable housing sites is currently being developed.

One exemplar project is the carbon zero affordable housing development in Down Ampney, which will deliver 13 social rented homes. The scheme involves a vacant plot owned by the Council and a neighbouring site with domestic garages owned by Bromford. The homes will feature roof-mounted solar PV panels, ensuring low utility bills for tenants. Planning consent was granted on 12 March 2025. However, Bromford is currently resolving surface water drainage design issues and coordinating with Thames Water regarding infrastructure upgrades. Unless Thames Water accelerates its plans, the start of construction may be delayed until 2027. Heads of Terms for the CDC land transfer and the Section 106 agreement are currently being negotiated.

Regarding the Old Station and Memorial Cottages on Sheep Street, the Old Station was previously assessed for service provision, including homelessness accommodation, but was found to be financially unviable for conversion. Despite efforts to identify cultural or community uses, no affordable scheme emerged. In July 2024, the Council decided to market both properties for sale. The sale of the Old Station was successfully completed on 11 April 2025 enabling the building to be brought back into use. The sale of the Memorial Cottages is still pending, with completion expected following the removal of the parking order in July/August 2025. The successful bidders are engaged in the legal process, and once completed, the buildings will be brought back into productive use.

## 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 through investment in our stock of leisure facilities and other non-facility interventions. In March 2021, the 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 is being monitored by the Active Cotswolds Programme Board and reported to the Portfolio Board.

### Crowdfund Cotswold

Crowdfund Cotswold remains a key mechanism for supporting community-led initiatives across the District. Delivered in partnership with Spacehive, the programme empowers local groups, organisations, and residents to raise funds for projects that enhance community wellbeing, infrastructure, and cultural life. The Council provides match funding to eligible projects, helping to unlock additional financial support and increase the likelihood of successful delivery.

As part of the Spring 2025 round, five projects were launched. One has already been completed, while the remaining four are actively fundraising. Among these, the Phoenix Festival has attracted particularly strong community engagement, with approximately 150 individual pledges of support. This level of participation reflects the value placed on cultural events and the effectiveness of Crowdfund Cotswold in mobilising local support. The Council continues to promote the platform as a vital tool for enabling grassroots improvements aligned with local priorities.

#### Holiday Activity and Food Programme & Strengthening Communities Events

Funding for the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme has been extended for 2025. Following a successful Easter delivery, the Summer HAF programme has now been finalised, with the new booking system launched on 30 June 2025. Families and carers can access a wide range of activities and events through World Jungle and other local providers, ensuring children and young people remain active, engaged, and supported throughout the summer months.

In anticipation of potential gaps in HAF provision, the Council secured £50,000 through the Strengthening Local Communities Fund to deliver 14 community events across 2025, evenly distributed between the north and south of the District. These events are designed to be multi-generational, offering activities for children, young people, and adults, alongside information and support from key local organisations. All events include food provision and are delivered in collaboration with local community champions, using an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to ensure they are tailored to the specific needs of each community.

Alongside the Summer HAF programme, the next two Strengthening Community Events are scheduled to take place in Blockley and Cirencester. To date, events have already been successfully delivered in Moreton-in-Marsh, Cirencester, Bourton-on-the-Water, Fairford, Chipping Campden, and Tetbury, with over 400 residents participating. These events have provided a welcoming and inclusive environment for residents to enjoy a fun, relaxing, and informative afternoon. They have also created valuable opportunities for stallholders and service providers to engage directly with the community, share information, and explore collaborative approaches to improving outcomes for local people.

Each event also includes a community feedback forum, offering residents of all ages the opportunity to share their views on what works well in their area and what could be improved. This feedback is helping to shape future activity and ensure that services are responsive to local priorities.

#### Cotswold Food Network (CFN)

The Cotswold Food Network (CFN) continues to lead and coordinate efforts to improve food sustainability and resilience across the District. Its work is currently focused on two key themes: financial inclusion and cost of living, and food provision support.

A Food Network Event is scheduled for July 2025, where updates will be shared on key financial inclusion topics including the Household Support Fund, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) updates, the Council's Revenues and Benefits work, and the Advice First Aid programme. To support targeted outreach, the Council is using the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) to identify households in need. The current campaign focuses on fuel and water poverty, aiming to connect residents with support and reduce financial hardship. A revised version of the "Worrying About Money?" leaflet, tailored specifically for the Cotswold context, has been produced. 4,000 printed copies have been distributed to local organisations and community venues to ensure wide accessibility.

In support of food provision, the CFN has developed a Food Procurement Guide to promote best practices for food sourcing at meetings and events, with an emphasis on local procurement and waste reduction. A complementary Allotments Mini Guide has also been produced to encourage local food growing. A Cookery Classes Guide, detailing free and low-cost cookery classes available across the District, has been drafted and will soon be published. This resource will be mapped using GIS and will include a list of recommended local caterers. In response to ecological and food access challenges, a Venison Supply Project is currently being scoped. This initiative aims to address deer overpopulation while supplying free venison meat to food provision charities. Monthly newsletters are produced and distributed to the CFN's food provision and growing network mailing list, ensuring stakeholders are kept informed of developments, opportunities, and resources.

### Community Building

The Council continues to support the Cotswold Youth Network in its efforts to enhance mental health and youth services across the District, fostering collaboration among local organisations. Recent work includes supporting Northleach Teen Space with team training and the introduction of targeted interventions from the Ernest Cook Trust, aimed at improving outcomes for young people.

Support for Digital Inclusion also remains a priority. The Council has provided ongoing assistance to the Digi Hubs, and has recently handed over delivery of the 'Getting Connected' and 'Staying Connected' digital skills courses, enabling the hubs to continue this work independently and sustainably.

The Strengthening Communities events have been well received, with positive feedback from both residents and partner organisations. These events provide valuable opportunities to engage with communities on a range of topics including the cost of living, health and wellbeing, community development, and social isolation. The Council continues to collaborate with a wide range of partners—including the NHS, Citizens Advice, Cotswold Friends, The Churn Project, Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue, Falls Prevention, Foodbanks, and the Carer's Hub—to build on the success of the Community Building Roadshow held in 2024.

That initiative provided residents with access to advice, support, and signposting, while also enabling the Council to gather valuable insights into how people feel about their communities.

## Supporting the Economy

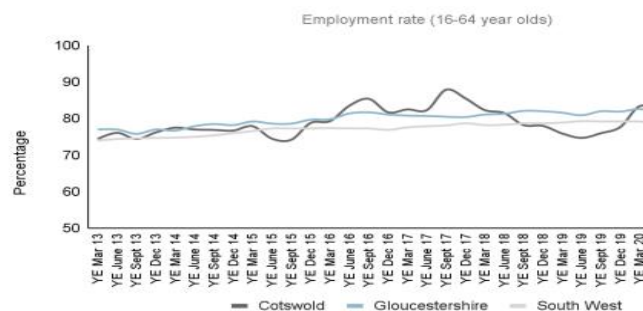


### The Context

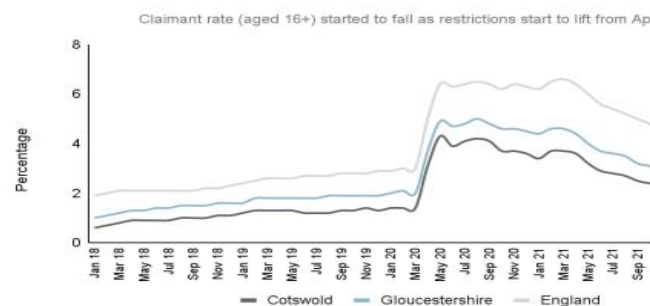
The District supports an economically active population of an estimated 42,600 and has strengths in finance and business services, ICT including science and technology, retail, and accommodation and food services. Around 90% of businesses are micro businesses employing fewer than 10 people. Median wages for people working in the district are below the national average, and affordability of housing is a significant issue for the district, which can result in skill and labour shortages.

Historically, unemployment has been relatively low but increased during the pandemic. It has fallen back significantly and now stands at just under 2% - the lowest in the county, but still slightly above the pre-pandemic level. The claimant count did see a proportionally significant rise in February 2020 of just over 100 (based on around 1000 total unemployment). This is believed to be due to businesses anticipating the employers' national insurance rise. It has dropped back very slightly since then.

The national and global economies have faced uncertainty as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and sharply rising prices, particularly for energy, fuel and food, which continues to impact on disposable income and living standards. Although energy and fuel costs, and the overall inflation rate, have dropped back, prices are still significantly higher than prior to the invasion.



Source: ONS, Annual Population Survey

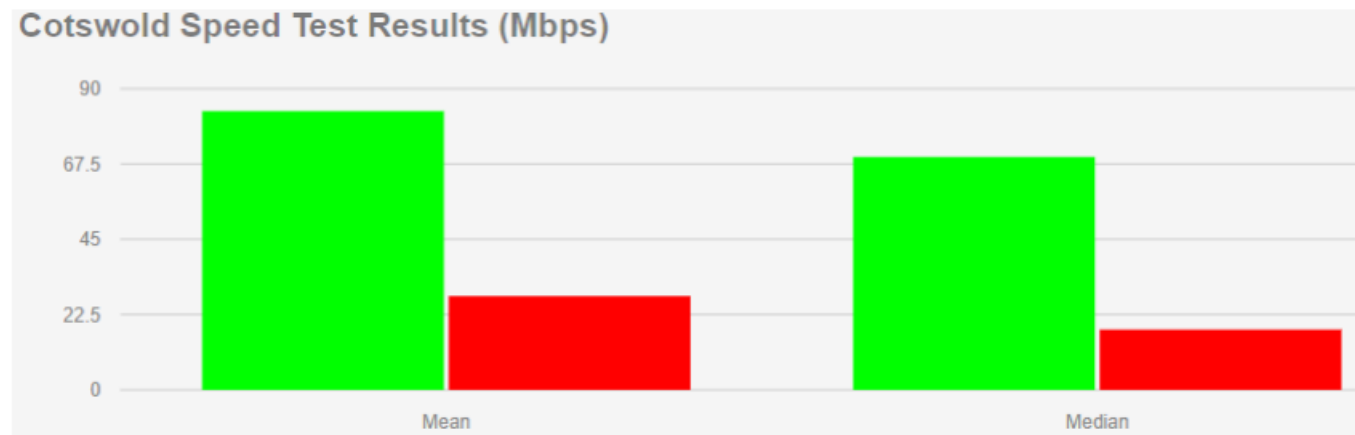
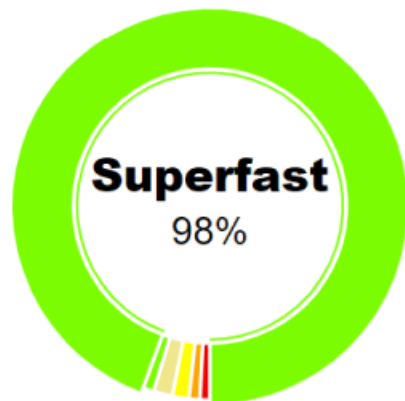


Source: ONS, Crown Copyright Reserved (Nomis)

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

The lack of a reliable broadband connection especially in rural districts can add to social isolation as well as reduce opportunities to be economically active. Openreach has been working in Cirencester and has announced plans to deliver full fibre to Tetbury, South Cerney, Lechlade, Northleach, Fairford and Bourton-on-the-Water by 2026 at the latest. However, there are still some areas where broadband is poor and even superfast connectivity is not sufficient for some businesses to operate in the way they wish to. The Council has been working with the Fastershire Project to address these areas. The Fastershire Project ceased at the end of March 2024 and has been 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 in February 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 and now stands at over 70%. This reflects the ongoing work by the infrastructure providers and the fact that commercial activity is concentrated on providing a full fibre service to the 'easier to reach' areas whereas the last 1.4% who do not yet have superfast broadband fall firmly within the 'difficult to reach' category.



Much of our work to enable a vibrant economy will be achieved in partnership with key stakeholders ranging from the County Council to 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 refreshed Green Economic Growth Strategy 2025-29 was adopted by Cabinet in March 2025. It sets out the challenges and issues for the district and how they will be addressed. The strategy has been informed by the Gloucestershire Economic Strategy, which was approved by the County Council's Cabinet in May 2024 and was noted by the new City Region Board in September 2024.

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 Cotswold Casement Co Ltd in Moreton-in-Marsh and heard about the North Cotswolds Awards (as the name suggests, a set of business-related awards covering the North Cotswolds) and about the Cotswold Catalyst programme, run by the Cirencester Growth Hub, which provides intensive support and advice to five local businesses who have potential for growth.

In 2022, the Council was awarded £1 million over three years from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for the period 2022-23 to 2024-25. The Council's Local Investment Plan, which sets out how the Council proposes to use the money, was approved by the government in early December 2022. The fund has three themes – Community and Place, Supporting Local Business and, in year three, People and Skills. Completed projects including 'Clean and Green' initiatives, new offices at The Growth Hub/Farm49, a feasibility study and works to the Old Station building in Cirencester, works to restore the clocktower on the Redesdale Hall in Moreton-in-Marsh, a significant contribution to bringing the former House of Fraser in Cirencester back into use and a new website for the Cotswold Lakes area to reflect its change in branding from the Cotswold Water Park. Cabinet in March 2023 agreed to allocate up to £135,000 a year for 2023-24 and 2024-25 to the Growth Hub in Cirencester to provide business support. One positive benefit of this funding is that the Growth Hub has been able to expand its outreach programme across the district, particularly in the north in areas like Moreton-in-Marsh and Chipping Campden. The



Business Navigators for the outreach programme have been using the Council's Moreton Area Office as their base when working in the area. A number of events have taken place in the north of the district.

The Council has been awarded a further £327,146 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund for 2025-26. Cabinet has already agreed to fund the Growth Hub and the initiative with The Churn Project to help people furthest away from the labour market into jobs, training and volunteering. An open application process was run for the remaining unallocated funding of around £120,000 and decisions have now been made on which projects to fund .

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 procured a delivery partner for the business grants (ALP Synergy Ltd) and the village hall grants (GRCC – formerly Gloucestershire Rural Community Council) jointly with the Forest of Dean District Council. All of the business grant-funded projects have now been completed. Fourteen grants for village halls have been approved and all of these projects have been delivered. A number of active travel and community and heritage buildings applications have been approved, with the projects in question now completed.

A further £229,240 has been allocated to the Council from the Rural England Prosperity Fund for 2025-26. A report to Full Council in May agreed the approach to using this funding. An open application process was run, which closed on 16th June. Applications were received requesting over £750,000. The majority of available funding has now been allocated and decisions published, but a relatively small amount of funding remains to be allocated and a number of applications are still under consideration.

Town centres are crucial, both economically and for civic pride. The number of vacant retail units in town centres serves as an indicator of their health and reflects the Council's efforts to support their recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey conducted in August 2021 revealed that Cirencester had a town centre vacancy rate of 11%, which was three percentage points below the national average. This rate improved to just under 6% in April 2022 and to just under 5% in October 2022. At the end of April 2025, the vacancy rate stood at 4.8%, with several of the remaining units either under offer or undergoing refurbishment. The former House of Fraser in the Market Place, which was the longest-standing vacant building, has now been leased to the Grace Network who have now opened under the branding of Monastery & Co. The building houses a number of social enterprises including food-related, bikes, children's clothes and second-hand furniture. A number of other new entrants have opened in the town, including The White Company, The Works and a number of independent businesses. In the smaller towns within the district, vacancy rates are generally low, though even a few vacancies can significantly impact

percentages. Currently, there are no major concerns, but we remain vigilant about the pace of high street changes and the potential effects of the cost-of-living crisis. We will continue to monitor these developments closely and, indeed, are planning to undertake an initiative in the three towns where vacancies are at the highest level (Lechlade, Moreton-in-Marsj and Tetbury), to try to understand the reasons for this and what can be done to counter it. The conversion of retail spaces to residential use in smaller towns is also a concern as it may impact the town's 'critical mass' and its ability to attract visitors.

The Cotswolds.com website, managed by the Council's Tourism Team, remains firmly established as the leading online destination for the Cotswolds, consistently ranking number one on Google. Over the past 12 months, the site has attracted 1.6 million users and generated 3.8 million page views, reflecting its central role in promoting the region to domestic and international audiences.

To maintain and enhance this position, Cotswolds Tourism has successfully secured two funding streams: UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) support for website enhancements, and a Visit England Asset Creation Grant via the Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) 1 2. The Asset Creation Grant has enabled the commissioning of new imagery to refresh and enrich the site's visual appeal. Meanwhile, the UKSPF funding is being used to deliver a visual redesign and introduce new functionality, including a microsite builder. This will allow for improved promotion of strategic priorities such as sustainability, accessibility, and specialist interests. Development work is underway, with the upgraded site expected to go live by the end of summer 2025 3.

Additional UKSPF funding has been secured to support the creation of Sustainability Champions, representing diverse sectors of the visitor economy. These champions will act as exemplars, sharing best practices and encouraging more sustainable approaches across the industry. The Help to Thrive initiative is also being delivered, supporting businesses—both within and beyond the traditional visitor economy—to develop new visitor experiences and improve their reach through digital marketing and engagement with trade and group travel markets.

Cotswolds Tourism continues to operate as a membership-based organisation, with all marketing activity funded through membership income. Membership currently stands at 418 businesses, generating £100,000 in income over the past year. The primary marketing channels remain the Cotswolds.com website and the organisation's social media platforms, which now boast a combined following of over 160,000. With a new Membership Manager in post, networking events have resumed, attracting over 150 businesses to the first two events.

The Cotswolds Plus LVEP, led by Cotswolds Tourism, is now fully established and recognised by Visit England as part of the national portfolio of high-performing partnerships. Seven workstreams have been agreed, covering Sustainability (public transport and biodiversity), Business Support, Data and Research, Travel Trade, Accessibility and Inclusion, and Skills and Training. This strategic collaboration is helping to shape the future of tourism across the wider region, ensuring it remains vibrant, inclusive, and economically resilient.

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

- The Royal Agricultural University (RAU) to bring forward their Innovation Village project. The plans include teaching and research space, incubator and grow-on business units, although the exact make-up of the development is likely to evolve as the project progresses. The Council assisted the RAU to secure £100,000 from the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee Strategic Economic Development Fund to assist with the cost of project management over a two-year period. A public launch of the project took place on 20 January 2023 and attracted considerable media attention. The council continues to liaise actively with the university on this project. A planning application has been submitted for the scheme in April 2024 (Ref: 24/01143/OUT). It is hoped that the application will be determined within the next few months.
- The former Mitsubishi site in Cirencester, is now renamed Watermoor Point and is home to a significant 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 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. 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.
- The Fire Service College/Capita regarding the potential for a wider Centre for National Resilience at Moreton-in-Marsh.

Kier Highways are continuing to progress the A417 Missing Link project on behalf of National Highways. The project, which at around £460m, is due to complete in 2027 and is the biggest infrastructure investment in the district and indeed the whole county for a generation. It 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. The value to the local economy is being tracked by Kier, who are using local suppliers and sub-contractors wherever possible.