



COTSWOLD

District Council

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT

January - March 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

- Cotswold Home Solar remains actively promoted and delivered, with 27 households having already installed solar panels. Additionally, 18 more households have placed deposits for installation.
- The Council has partnered with Gloucestershire authorities to launch a retrofit support service, live since January 22nd. The service provides energy efficiency plans, vetted installers, and project management. To date, 7 households have requested plans.
- The installation of cycle parking concluded, with a total of 78 racks installed across the area, and across a wide range of destinations, ranging from community assets to new or established businesses.
- During the quarter, the rebranding of the Water Park to 'Cotswold Lakes' officially took place, with an event on 28th March to promote the new branding and the variety of activities the 'Lakes' offer.
- The Spring Round of Crowdfund Cotswold closed on 9th April, with 5 to 6 project proposals currently being verified before launch on the platform. The February project creator workshop was well attended and generated several ideas expected to come forward later this year or early next.
- The first two of fourteen 'Strengthening Communities' events took place over February half term, bringing together statutory and community organisations to promote services in the district's larger settlements. These events focus on empowering residents to engage in positive local activity, with strong support from health partners. The team also worked with partners to secure the local Digihubs contract for the Churn and Cotswold Friends, ensuring continued digital inclusion support across the district.
- The final version of the refreshed Green Economic Growth Strategy was adopted by Cabinet in March 2025.

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 rebranding of the Water Park to 'Cotswold Lakes' officially took place, with an event on 28th March to promote the new branding and the variety of activities the 'Lakes' offer. The installation of cycle parking concluded, with a total of 78 racks installed across the area, and across a wide range of destinations, ranging from community assets to new or established businesses.

Participating businesses have been surveyed soon after installation. This work confirms that the stands are perceived to have improved security, and consequentially have helped increase cycling levels at the destination, with some use across the week, and confirms businesses have been satisfied by the installation process. We work expect usage to pick up incrementally, as potential users become aware of their availability, and adapt/increase cycle travel to take in these destinations.

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

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

Responding to the Climate Emergency



The Context

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. An updated report of progress against the net zero target has been carried out which identified the Council will fail to reach net zero should remedial action not be taken. In May, Cabinet will be reviewing the recommendation to launch a Corporate Net Zero Transformation Programme overseen by a Climate Board to address the identified risk and strengthen governance arrangements in this space. A number of activities to reduce council carbon emissions are in development. A business case has been agreed and an offer has been made to New Brewery Arts for the provision of solar PV. A funding proposal has been submitted to the Waste and Resources Partnership for an waste fleet EV transition feasibility study.

'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 which will be presented to Cabinet in May. This contains 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 considers 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 has been 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.

Colleagues from both planning policy and community wellbeing & economic growth teams attended a CCRI led net zero food and farming workshop in April to examine how actors across Gloucestershire can collaborate with each other and wider partners, on a policy approach that supports the transformational changes needed in the production and consumption of food.

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 in May.

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. The latest round has just closed and funding will be announced shortly. 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



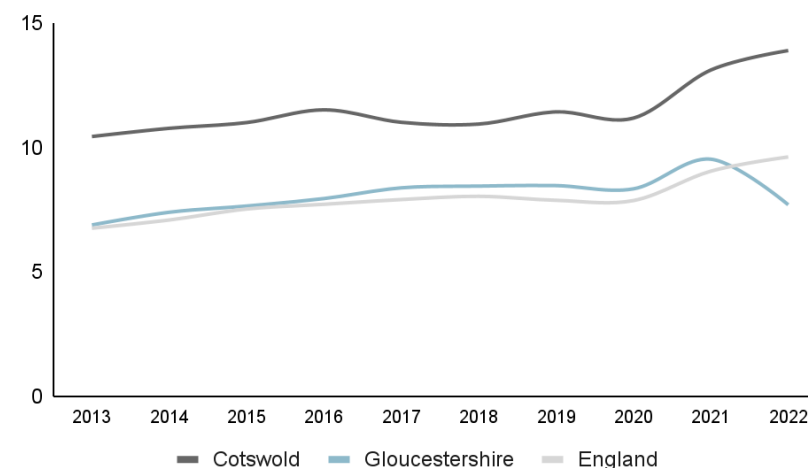
The Context

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

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

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

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



Actions we are taking

The Council's Affordable Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan was adopted by Cabinet on 8 February 2021 and set out the delivery strategy for the Council to accelerate the provision of social rented and affordable homes for local people. The current focus is to facilitate the affordable housing identified

within the Local Plan and through rural exception sites and community-led housing opportunities, and to work with Housing Associations to maximise affordable housing delivery. The Council plans to go further and bring forward additional affordable homes through enabling and direct intervention, which may include the provision of land and other funding. In addition, any development the Council acquires or builds must be carbon zero in support of the Council's Climate Change emergency commitment. Although this will increase the cost of affordable housing, it will reduce ongoing revenue costs for tenants. Based on the outcomes from the councillor workshop in October 2020, discussions with local Registered Providers (RPs), and a review of delivery options, Officers recommended that the Council establish a formal partnership with one lead Registered Provider.

The partnership with Bromford to deliver carbon zero affordable homes at a site in Down Ampney will a vacant plot owned by CDC and a neighbouring site which has domestic garages on it, which is owned by Bromford developed with 13 social rented homes. The carbon efficiency of these dwelling means tenants will have low utility bills, with electricity generated by the roof mounted Solar PV. Planning consent was granted on 12th March, however Bromford need to resolve issues with the surface water drainage design and are discussing the timeline for Thames Water Infrastructure upgrades to accommodate the development. This may delay commencement of works until 2027 unless Thames Water will bring their upgrade plans forward. Heads of Terms for the CDC land transfer and the S106 are being negotiated with Bromford.

The Old station, Sheep street was previously assessed for service provision such as homelessness accommodation and other housing options, but the conversion was found to be unaffordable. Despite attempts to bring forward proposals for cultural and community use, no affordable scheme could be identified so in July 2024 Council took the decision to market the Old Station and Memorial Cottages for sale. The successful bidders are now engaged with the Council in the legal process to complete the sales. It is anticipated the sale will complete in April 2025 enabling the new owners to deliver plans to bring the buildings back into 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

The deadline for the Spring Round was 9th April. At the time of writing, project proposals are still undergoing verification before being launched on the Crowdfund Cotswold platform. However, we anticipate that five or six projects will be confirmed as part of this round once the checks are complete.

The Project Creator Workshop held in February was well attended and proved to be a valuable opportunity to support and inspire potential applicants. Several promising project ideas emerged during the session. While these were not ready in time for the spring deadline, we expect some to come forward in future rounds—either later this year or early next year.

Holiday Activity and Food Programme & Strengthening Communities Events

Funding for the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme was extended for 2025 and Easter HAF plans are already in place to continue the great work alongside World Jungle and other providers. In the event that HAF would not take place we secured £50,000 through the Strengthening Local Communities fund to offer 14 events throughout 2025, equally distributed between the south and north of the district. Even though HAF is continuing we are still going ahead with the events which are multi-generational, offering activities for children, young people, and adults providing information from key support organisations and include food. We will also offer a forum for all ages to share their thoughts on what's good and what could be better in their communities. Using the Asset-Based Community Development model, we will work with local community champions to target the needs of each community. The first event took place in Moreton-in-Marsh at the Redesdale Hall on 18th February, and the second in Cirencester at The Bingham Hall on 20th February. Both events were successful and received positive feedback and good all-round participation from residents and partner organisations. The next 2 events are at Bourton Cricket Club (15/4/25) and Fairford Community Centre (22/4/25).

Rural Domestic Abuse Champions

Cotswold, in collaboration with Tewkesbury, Stroud, and Forest of Dean, funded a joint post to promote Rural Domestic Abuse Champions across districts. The rationale for this post is that in rural areas, victims of domestic abuse are less likely to seek help and support due to lack of transport and isolation. The post, offering training via Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service (GDASS), helps identify and support individuals in abusive relationships in rural areas. There are currently 35 champions in Cotswold. GDASS continues to offer numerous training dates online, to train both Cotswold employees and staff at partner organisations.

Cotswold Food Network

The Council's work to improve food sustainability in the district continues to be directed through the Cotswold Food Network (CFN). The main work themes remain improving financial inclusion and cost of living support, and food provision.

Specific activity since the new year has included on financial inclusion: meeting local partner organisations to share information and promote VCSE engagement and support, in the Council's proposed LIFT-informed campaigns, to assist Cotswold families with the cost of living. Worrying about Money, the national leaflet

has been updated and in the first time, will feature as a Cotswold specific version (previously the leaflet was Stroud & Cotswold). Copies will be online and distributed in print.

Under food provision, there has been substantial progress to collect information on local organisational capacity to accept surplus food when it becomes available. This should improve the re-distribution of surplus food to local communities and reduce waste.

Cotswold Food Network since March now produces two monthly newsletters, based on the topics above. These are emailed to the relevant mailing lists. Finally Roz Savage MP, has asked to meet with Lizzie Dyer (freelance, strategic support for CFN) and Martin Hawkins (CDC Support Officer) on the topic of food sustainability activity in the South Cotswolds, which has been arranged in May.

Community Building

The team is actively supporting the Cotswold Youth Network by enhancing mental health and youth services and fostering collaboration among organisations. Specifically, the team is working with Northleach Teen Space to implement training for their team and introduce interventions from the Ernest Cook Trust. Additionally, the team continues to support the Digital Inclusion work in communities by collaborating with the Digital Hubs Project Manager from Forest Voluntary Action Forum and Gloucestershire County Council to establish Digital Hubs in the Cotswolds – The Digi Hub work has been awarded along with funding to a joint bid by Cotswold Friends and The Churn and we will continue to work with these partners to support Digital Inclusion in the District. We are utilising the Strengthening Communities events to engage with residents on topics such as the cost of living, health and wellbeing, community enhancement, and reducing isolation and continuing collaboration with partner organisations like Citizens Advice, Cotswold Friends, The Churn Project, Glos Fire & Rescue, Falls Prevention, Foodbanks, and Carer's Hub etc. to build on the work already done in the Community Building Roadshow in 2024 where residents received valuable advice, support, and signposting, and the council gathered important feedback on how they feel about their communities.

Supporting the Economy

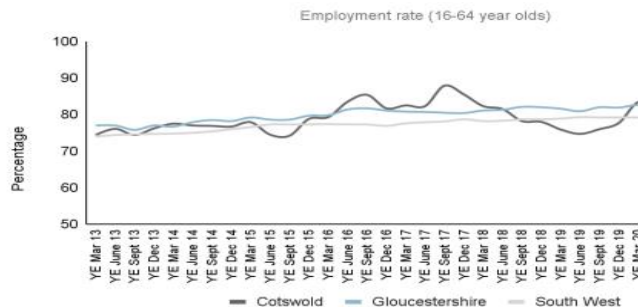


The Context

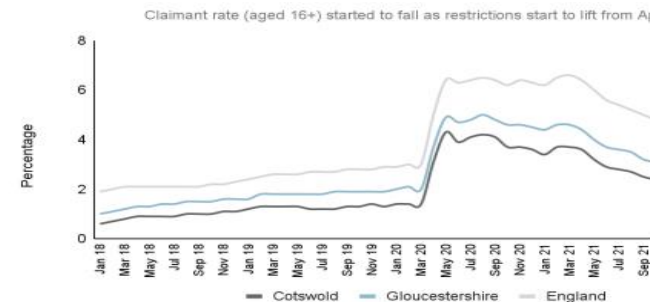
The District supports an economically active population of an estimated 42,600 and has strengths in finance and business services, ICT including science and technology, retail, and accommodation and food services. Around 90% of businesses are micro businesses employing fewer than 10 people. Median wages 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 over 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 2025 of just over 100 (based on around 1000 total unemployment). This is believed to be due to businesses anticipating the employers' national insurance rise.

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

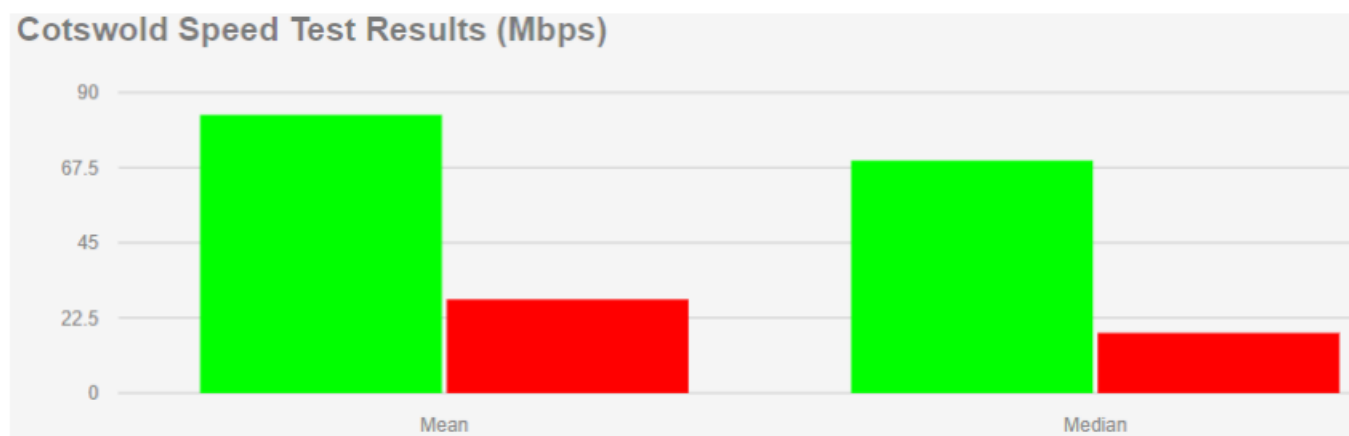
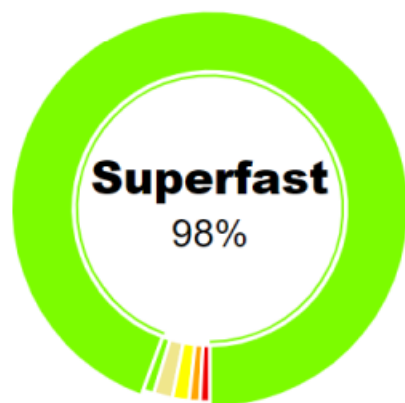


Source: ONS, Crown Copyright Reserved (Nomis)

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. We are seeking details of how their programme is going to be rolled out.

The County Council has introduced the Gloucestershire Digital Household Grant to use 4G technology to deliver connectivity in remote locations where fibre is not practical or is prohibitively expensive and residents have speeds of less than 30mbps. The first phase of the scheme started in the Forest of Dean but has been extended to qualifying households across Gloucestershire. The coverage of superfast (>30mbps) has increased slightly and ultrafast (>100mbps)/full fibre has moved up quite quickly according to figures on the ThinkBroadband website. This reflects the ongoing work by the infrastructure providers and the fact that commercial activity is concentrated on providing a full fibre service to the 'easier to reach' areas whereas the last 1.5% who do not yet have superfast broadband fall firmly within the 'difficult to reach' category, which the County Council scheme is seeking to address.



Much of our work to enable a vibrant economy will be achieved in partnership with key stakeholders ranging from the County Council 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 Lakes Brew Co and discussed business resilience, looked at the latest economic health dashboard and considered the approach to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund for 2025-26.

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 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 2024-35 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 has been run for the remaining unallocated funding of around £120,000 and decisions will be made soon after the County Council elections.

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 is going to Cabinet in May to agree the approach to using this funding.

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 March 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. Additionally, the conversion of retail spaces to residential use in smaller towns is a concern as it may impact the town's 'critical mass' and its ability to attract visitors.

The Cotswolds.com website run by the tourism team is firmly established as the leading site for the Cotswolds, no1 on Google with 1.6 million users and 3.8 million views in the last 12 months. However constant updating and improvements are needed to maintain and improve on this position. To this end, Cotswolds Tourism has successfully bid for two separate funding pots: UKSPF funding for website enhancements and via the Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) a Visit England grant for asset creation.

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

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

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

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

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.