

Comments on the Strategic and Local Plan Vision and Objectives Topic paper

January 2026

General

We recognise the value of a vision and objectives to guide the planning process by setting out a direction of travel, and that the exercise is constrained by government guidance on process. In our comments below we suggest how improvements might be made in the remaining stages of the visioning exercise in terms of style, process, ambition, content and capacity. We also offer an alternative vision of Cheltenham.

Style

The text has become very lengthy, repetitive and is hard to follow. Consequently, it falls short of being the lode star that its authors wish it to be. We propose the following changes to how to make the document easier to read and use:

- Include a single, specific, memorable sentence for the vision of the whole area.
- Use visuals and diagrams throughout to explain concepts and the hierarchy of ideas
- Hard edit the text to reduce the number of words, especially long words
- Add a glossary.

To show what is possible by way of simplification and shortening, we append (Annex 1) a summary of the current consultation document prepared by AI. It is already a clearer text, albeit needing some refinement.

Process

The fundamental problem with visioning is that, if it is to be credible and useful, it cannot be a fanciful wish list but must take realistic account of what is possible. And, while it should inspire an exciting picture of the future to initiate and guide change, it must also acknowledge the many unknowns and limitations. This paper fails to do this, in large part because it is untethered from what is possible. Some best practice approaches that might still be used to meet this challenge are attached (see Annex 2).

Ambition

Rather than a 'bold, ambitious overarching vision' (1.2), a vision that is 'realistic, achievable and engaging' might be better. One that could be delivered with the existing

(or predicted future) levels of officer, member and investment resources, and which will resonate with residents and civic bodies. Despite the claims to boldness, the proposed 2050 assumes the same technological and economic framework as now – no consideration of self driving cars, robot deliveries, VR home entertainment, retirement at 75? (or 35?), stagnating growth, ongoing economic costs of Brexit, migration, ageing populations, climate impacts, flooding, etc, to take obvious examples. The many known unknowns and unknown unknowns should at least be acknowledged; and the resulting plan should contain sufficient flexibility that it can respond to changed circumstances.

Content

On the content of the draft, we have these comments:

- We oppose the removal of the word ‘beauty’ from earlier drafts. While we note its removal from the NPPF, ‘beauty’ is the very foundation of Cheltenham’s economic history, and can be the foundation of a thriving future for all. We deeply regret the loss of an important quality and propose that it should be put back in. The attempt to remove the concept from the national planning lexicon makes a strong design message in Cheltenham’s planning policy even more important.
- We welcome the way in which the new draft has responded to comments on active travel (pages 21 and 24), nature recovery (22 and 31), town centre (32) and heritage and culture (34)
- However, the draft understates the importance of heritage and culture. In particular the vision should highlight the potential for heritage led regeneration, as advocated by Historic England ([Heritage Led Regeneration Toolkit | Historic England](#)). A target area for HE’s approach is the Lower High Street in Cheltenham.

Capacity

We have concerns about the capacity at officer and member level to deliver on the promise set out here without adding to resources and training; and we note the potential for focus and resources across the board to be diverted into local government reform over the next few years.

Vision for Cheltenham

The draft vision for Cheltenham reads:

- Cheltenham will become the new cyber capital for the UK, bringing with it a catalyst for growth and change in Gloucestershire, creating a destination of global significance. This will be ignited by the Golden Valley Development, a pioneering Garden Community integrating hi-tech business, residential and leisure uses. Cheltenham declared a climate Emergency in 2019 and has a target of reaching net zero by 2030, working with residents, communities and businesses to achieve

this. The number of affordable homes will be increased and a fabric first and energy efficient approach to homes will be achieved through the housing investment plan and residents will benefit from a more modern, financially sustainable and efficient council. Development and regeneration opportunities will be facilitated to support more town centre living to ensure that Cheltenham's growth and prosperity continues.

This fails to capture much that is unique about our town, such as its architectural heritage, its cultural standing and its green setting. These should shape its development in the years to come as much as the factors identified in the draft vision above.

Accordingly, we offer this (10% shorter) alternative for a 2040 vision:

- Cheltenham is one of the most prosperous, beautiful, culturally rich and inclusive towns in England. It offers an outstanding example of town centre living, care for heritage and heritage-led regeneration. It is noted for the value it places on nature through its parks, a network of biodiverse-rich green spaces and trees in every street. It has also become the cyber capital for the UK, with the Golden Valley Development successfully integrating hi-tech business, residential and leisure uses. Cheltenham reached a target of net zero by 2030. It has adapted its housing stock to climate change and there are many more affordable homes. Its transport system prioritises public transport and active travel. Life in Cheltenham is healthier, happier and less stressful than in 2026.

ANNEX 1 – An AI summary of the topic paper

1. Purpose and Status of the Topic Paper

The Vision and Objectives Topic Paper sets out the proposed overarching Vision and Strategic Objectives for the Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan (SLP). These provide the foundational framework for all subsequent spatial strategy choices, site allocations and planning policies.

The paper explains what the Vision and Objectives are, how they have been shaped by consultation, evidence, sustainability appraisal and policy reform, and how they align with national planning policy and the corporate priorities of the three councils. It forms part of ongoing Regulation 18 engagement ahead of Regulation 19 submission.

2. Strategic Context

The three councils have planned jointly since 2008, culminating in the Joint Core Strategy adopted in 2017. In 2023 they agreed to produce a single Strategic and Local Plan, supported by Gloucestershire County Council. This reflects shared housing and labour markets, cross-boundary infrastructure and environmental challenges, and the strengthened duty to cooperate. The SLP is being prepared in a changed context shaped by post-pandemic conditions, climate and ecological emergencies, significant planning reform and uncertainty around local government reorganisation. The Vision is therefore designed to be ambitious, resilient and flexible.

3. Progress to Date

Preparation of the SLP has involved agreement of a Gloucestershire Statement of Common Ground, commissioning of evidence on housing, employment, centres, flood risk and Green Belt, and preparation of a Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulations Assessment. A Regulation 18 consultation ran from January to March 2024 on spatial options, policy themes and a draft Vision and Objectives. The Topic Paper explains how consultation responses and evidence have shaped revisions.

4. The Proposed Vision and Strategic Objectives

The Vision is structured around environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development and is phased over three horizons. By 2030 the focus is on delivery and transition: carbon-neutral, high-quality housing; job creation supported by infrastructure; a brownfield-first approach with optimum densities in sustainable locations; protection of greenfield land and Best and Most Versatile agricultural soils; climate mitigation and adaptation; active travel and reduced car dependency; biodiversity net gain and nature recovery; flood risk avoidance; strong centres with mixed uses; meeting the full range of housing needs; and growth in key economic sectors. By 2040 the emphasis shifts to place-making and systemic change: net zero carbon development supported by renewable energy; interconnected green spaces and

waterways; frequent and attractive public transport; reduced reliance on private cars; strong local identity and inclusive design; safer environments; resilient and adaptable

centres; a flourishing circular economy; skills development and entrepreneurship; and high-quality digital connectivity. By 2050 the Vision anticipates a mature, resilient area: net zero carbon plus in perpetuity; energy entirely from renewables; fully restored habitats and enriched landscapes; walking, cycling and mass transit as the dominant modes of travel; comprehensive reuse of brownfield and under-used land; no homelessness; a full range of high-quality housing; thriving, adaptable centres; and a strong tourism economy based on exceptional natural and built environments.

5. Local Priorities

The Vision is complemented by place-specific priorities. Tewkesbury focuses on climate and flood resilience, Garden Communities, advanced engineering, agri-tech, aerospace, youth and affordable housing.

Cheltenham emphasises cyber leadership, the Golden Valley development, net zero by 2030, affordable housing delivery and town centre living. Gloucester prioritises health and wellbeing, tackling homelessness, greening the city, regeneration including The Forum and Matson and Podsmead, heritage-led tourism and creative industries. These ensure the Vision is locally distinctive.

6. Inputs Shaping the Vision

The Sustainability Appraisal found the Vision and Objectives perform positively overall, particularly on climate change, flood risk, green infrastructure, health, accessibility and economic growth. It prompted stronger references to cultural heritage, sustainable waste management and protection of Best and Most Versatile soils. Regulation 18 consultation responses highlighted the need to extend the Vision timeframe to 2050, strengthen commitments on sustainable transport, climate action and nature recovery, clarify infrastructure delivery, address density and land capacity, balance brownfield and greenfield development, protect farmland and villages, manage flood risk, support centres, improve affordability and meet specialist housing needs. The paper documents how these themes have been reflected in revised wording.

7. Planning Reform

The Vision and Objectives reflect recent National Planning Policy Framework reforms, including strengthened requirements to meet housing needs in full, reinstated five-year housing land supply, expectations for Green Belt review and recognition of Grey Belt land, enhanced affordable housing requirements, stronger support for clean energy and modern economic sectors, and a vision-led approach to sustainable transport.

8. Corporate Alignment

The Vision aligns closely with the corporate plans of Tewkesbury Borough Council, Cheltenham Borough Council and Gloucester City Council. Changes to the Vision and Objectives explicitly reflect commitments on climate neutrality, affordable housing, regeneration, biodiversity, community safety, health and wellbeing, economic growth and infrastructure delivery.

9. Conclusions and Next Steps

The Topic Paper concludes that the revised Vision and Strategic Objectives provide a clearer, more measurable and more ambitious foundation for the Strategic and Local Plan, balancing environmental, social and economic priorities while remaining flexible. Further consultation is planned in December 2025, with continued refinement leading to Regulation 19 submission in 2026. The planning forum has already commented on several of the consultation papers issued as part of the strategic and local plan review exercise. This paper for the forum relates to the vision and objectives topic paper, which is intended to be the foundation for the new strategic and local plan.

ANNEX 2 – Two approaches to vision exercises

1: Fast, low-cost expert brainstorming

Assemble local planners, business leaders and stakeholders for an intensive workshop, perhaps with wine

Produce a Vision in a single day

Accept limitations explicitly and include caveats about uncertainty.

This “quick and dirty” approach is cheap and may be no worse than more elaborate exercises.

2: Structured scenario planning

Develop multiple plausible scenarios

Test policies for resilience and sensitivity across different futures

Identify robust policies effective under varied conditions.

This approach is resource-intensive and time-consuming but produces a systematic, adaptable framework