

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet 14 July 2026

Cheltenham Town Centre and Vacant Units Action Plan update

Accountable member:

Cllr Izaac Tailford, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Wellbeing and Public Realm

Accountable officer:

Helen Mole, Head of economic development, comms and marketing

Ward(s) affected:

Town Centre - All Saints, College, Lansdown, St Paul's, Pittville

Key Decision: No

Executive summary:

Cheltenham town centre boasts a unique mix of Regency architecture, independent retailers and High Street names, alongside a vibrant and award winning food and drink scene. Throughout the year, the town centre plays host to many major festivals and events that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors, as well as providing residents with an important space for community interaction and civic activity.

Like many towns across the UK, Cheltenham is faced with a growing number of challenges, including changing retail patterns, rising business costs, and social and environmental issues. The council recognises all of this and is prioritising the vitality and resilience of the town centre through a programme of activities which are set out in this report.

Recommendations: That Cabinet:

- 1. notes the work underway by the council and partners to support the town centre and its businesses.**

2. notes the report updating on progress against delivery of the vacant units action plan to date.

1. Implications

1.1 Financial, Property and Asset implications

All activities within this report are covered by existing budgets or have no financial implications. If a High Street Rental Auction is undertaken in the future, there will be costs associated with this, which will be subject to separate approval process.

Signed off by: Ela Jankowska – Finance Business Partner

Date: 23.06.2026

1.2 Legal implications

If the full High Street Rental Auctions process is undertaken in the future, this will require a thorough legal review and process implemented. At present, no further legal implications arising from this report.

Signed off by: Alison McKane, Interim Deputy Monitoring Officer

1.3 Environmental and climate change implications

A climate change impact assessment was carried out for the vacant units action plan at implementation. No further environmental and climate change implications arising from this report.

Signed off by: Maizy McCann, Climate Officer Maizy.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities

This report contributes to the following Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Securing our future

1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

See below.

1.6 Performance management – monitoring and review

The vacant units action plan was created following consultation and engagement with stakeholders, setting out actions, timescales, owners and outcomes. These are monitored via reports to the council's leadership team and members.

2 Background

2.1 Cheltenham town centre plays a critical role in the town's economy. The town supports a diverse mix of retail, hospitality, cultural venues and professional services, contributing significantly to local employment and business growth. The town centre boasts a unique mix of Regency architecture, independent retailers and High Street names, a vibrant food and drink scene, as well as many major festivals and events that attract visitors from across the UK and beyond.

2.2 Beyond its economic contribution, the town centre provides an important space for community interaction and civic activity. A thriving and well-maintained centre supports wellbeing, encourages footfall and investment, and underpins confidence in the wider local economy. Ensuring its continued vitality is therefore essential not only for businesses, but also for residents, visitors, and the long-term prosperity of Cheltenham.

2.3 Town centres across the UK are undergoing a period of significant structural change, driven by evolving consumer behaviour, the growth of online retail, and wider economic pressures. The traditional retail-led model is evolving into a more mixed-use offer, where leisure, hospitality, culture, and services play an increasingly important role. This transition presents both opportunities and challenges, as places must adapt quickly to remain relevant, attractive and economically viable.

2.4 Cheltenham is not immune to these national trends. Businesses in the town centre continue to face cost pressures, including increases in nationally set business rates, rising energy costs and the ongoing effects of the cost-of-living crisis, all of which have impacted both consumer spending and business resilience. At the same time, changing patterns of work and footfall, particularly since the pandemic, have required businesses to adapt their offer and operating models.

2.5 In addition to economic challenges, there are wider social and environmental issues that influence perceptions of the town centre. Rough sleeping and vulnerability, or anti-social behaviour, for example, are complex issues seen across many town centres that require a coordinated, partnership-based response balancing enforcement with appropriate support.

2.6 The council recognises all of this and is prioritising the vitality and resilience of the town centre through a programme of activities which are summarised below.

2.7 Work to reduce the number of vacant shops

In September 2023, Cabinet approved the adoption of the Vacant Units Action Plan, committing to a focused and sustained effort to reduce the number and impact of vacant properties in the town centre.

This section sets out progress against key actions within the plan:

- **Vacancy rate:** 7.8% of town centre units are currently empty, slightly lower than this time last year, and well below the national average of c.14%, reflecting a comparatively resilient local position. This demonstrates the strong appeal of the town as well as the effectiveness of targeted interventions to support occupancy.

The town has experienced some longer-term vacancies and officers have been working actively with landlords on these properties. A persistently vacant unit on the High Street is now being renovated for occupation, after engagement with the building owner by council officers.

A key challenge is managing public perception of vacancy rates. While Cheltenham's vacancy rate is around half the national average, some empty units are in highly visible locations, which has a bigger impact. A current example of this is Cavendish House which, due to its size, prominent position, and strong public connection, has attracted national attention since becoming vacant. Planning officers are currently working with the building's owners on their proposals to bring it back into use. However, it is important to note that the council, as local planning authority, cannot direct when planning applications are submitted and is therefore reliant on landowners and developers to bring forward proposals in a timely manner.

- **Enforcement action:** The council has continued to take proportionate enforcement action where appropriate, including use of planning, environmental health and property-related powers to address long-term vacant and poorly maintained units.
- **Direct action on persistently vacant units:** High Street Rental Auction (HSRA) powers introduced through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 enable local authorities to require the rental of persistently vacant high street premises, helping bring empty units back into productive use. This provides a new tool to support town centre regeneration, with the aim of reducing long-term vacancy rates.

Before any rental auction can take place, the council must first consult upon and formally designate a relevant street on which the powers may be used, and the council will progress this during 2026.

Subject to consultation, official designation of an area of the town centre will enable the next stage of the process through which the council can engage with landlords of eligible long-term empty commercial premises and, where voluntary action is unsuccessful, require the property to be let through a rental auction.

- **Work with landlords and letting agents:** Officers continue to engage proactively with landlords and agents to encourage letting activity, support realistic rental expectations and identify barriers to occupation. This includes direct outreach, introductions, and promotion of available units to prospective occupiers.

2.8 Promotion of Cheltenham locally, nationally, and internationally

The council has continued its focus on the marketing and promotion of Cheltenham as a destination for residents and visitors through the Visit Cheltenham brand. Strong partnerships are in place with Cheltenham Business Improvement District (BID) and strategic visitor economy businesses, for example Cheltenham Trust, Cheltenham Festivals and The Jockey Club, working on initiatives to encourage visitors and residents to participate in everything that Cheltenham has to offer.

The town is one of the top regional destinations for shopping, leisure, and hospitality. In 2024, Cheltenham welcomed just under 2.1 million visitors - a slight increase on 2023. Those visitors spent an estimated £191,873,000 – an increase of 5% on 2023 and the visitor economy supports around 4% of all employment.

The Visit Cheltenham website was upgraded over the summer of 2025, and this is already seeing results with improved engagement and further promotional opportunities for businesses.

Key statistics for Visit Cheltenham are:

- Visit Cheltenham has 89,000 followers on social media.
- 2.1 million website sessions on www.visitcheltenham.com in 2025.
- 80,000 printed Cheltenham guides distributed around the region in 2025.
- Fortnightly newsletter sent to c.45,000 subscribers.

Cheltenham is a partner in the Cotswolds Local Visitor Economy Partnership, recognised by VisitBritain and VisitEngland, which enables the team to showcase the town and surrounding region on a national and international stage, raising its profile and supporting the sustainability of the visitor economy into the future.

2.9 Public realm engagement

The council is working in partnership with Gloucestershire County Council and Cheltenham BID to develop a shared vision that helps transform the high street making it even more welcoming. This can be achieved by better coordination of street design, layout, paving, lighting, trees and planting as well as signage, seating,

accessibility and management including street repairs or cleansing.

This collaborative approach will ensure alignment between highway responsibilities, local business needs and wider place-making objectives.

Engagement activity was carried out via a survey which the public and local businesses were invited to complete. The public survey concluded on 10th July, and feedback will be reviewed and presented in due course.

More information is available here: [Public engagement launched on future of Cheltenham - Cheltenham BID](#)

2.10 Planning policy

Work on the [Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan](#) (SLP) is underway. This emerging plan places a strong emphasis on the evolving role of city and town centres over the next 15 years, recognising the need for greater flexibility in how these spaces are used and developed.

The plan is likely to support diversification, active frontages, and the adaptive reuse of buildings to respond to changing retail and economic conditions.

This evolving policy approach refers to the vacant units action plan, as it supports the proactive reuse and repurposing of empty premises. By encouraging a broader mix of uses and reducing barriers to occupation, the plan provides a supportive foundation for bringing vacant units back into active use, helping to strengthen footfall, economic activity, and the overall attractiveness of centres.

The SLP will be available for consultation later this year in advance of being submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for independent examination.

2.11 Clean, safe, and welcoming

To support businesses and ensure a clean, safe, and welcoming environment in the town centre, officers across the council engage with partner organisations to carry out activities including:

- The achievement of Cheltenham's 11th [Purple Flag accreditation](#). Similar in principle to the Blue Flag for beaches, the Purple Flag assesses qualities of diversity, vibrancy, accessibility, cleanliness and partnership working. With evidence assessed by independent experts, the continued achievement of this award gives positive reassurance to people planning a night out in the town.
- Through weekly multi-agency meetings, officers and partners proactively monitor, engage and support rough sleepers. This approach means that

Cheltenham's rough sleeper numbers have, generally, remained low and substantially lower than our nearest urban centres.

- Deployment of mobile CCTV in areas suffering from anti-social behaviour and enviro-crime hotspots enables the council to proactively monitor areas and to be responsive to reports of emerging issues.
- Ongoing work to strengthen and improve Cheltenham's markets, via the Bill currently going through parliament, is delivered in recognition of the fact that markets play an important role in the cultural life and offer of the town. Officers work with existing businesses to maximise the potential of the markets to make a substantial contribution to economic growth, supporting footfall to the high street and wellbeing of the town.
- Support for the BID's new cleansing initiative which provides businesses in the BID zone with free, fast access to professional cleansing services such as graffiti removal, litter cleanup, and specialist removal of environmental contamination like spillages.

2.12 Recognising the value of our heritage

The council allocated funding via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to support a collaborative project with local history societies and amenity groups to celebrate our heritage through the newly adopted Heritage Action Plan. This plan allows residents, businesses, visitors, and schools to gain a deeper understanding of our town, why we are here, and how our future heritage is developing.

This resource supports the role heritage plays as part of the vibrancy of our town centre, strengthening town centre identity, generating local pride and stewardship, and informing future development.

Further information can be found here:

- [The Making of Cheltenham](#)
- [Cheltenham Heritage Action Plan](#)
- [Cheltenham Story](#)
- [Cheltenham Heritage Index](#)

Officers are also currently undertaking a review of Cheltenham's conservation areas including the conservation area that covers the entirety of the town centre.

2.13 Conclusion

Cheltenham town centre remains a vital economic and social asset, demonstrating resilience despite ongoing national and local challenges. Through a comprehensive and partnership-driven approach, the council is actively supporting its continued

vitality by reducing vacancies, enhancing the visitor economy, improving the public realm and maintaining a clean, safe and welcoming environment.

Alongside forward-looking planning policy and investment in heritage and place identity, these actions position the town centre to adapt to changing demands, attract investment and sustain its role as a vibrant, inclusive and prosperous heart of the community for residents, businesses and visitors alike.

3 Reasons for recommendations

Members are asked to note the above update on activity.

4 Consultation and feedback

- 4.1 There is ongoing engagement with town centre stakeholders, including Gloucestershire County Council, Cheltenham BID, Cheltenham Civic Society, Gloucestershire Constabulary, and more.
- 4.2 The creation of the action plan included engagement with key town centre stakeholders, property owners and landlords, and agents promoting the town centre.
- 4.3 Partnerships and community groups have evolved over time, with ongoing engagement maintained through a network of active and varied boards, forums and collaborative platforms.

5 Key risks

There are multiple factors influencing the success and vitality of the town centre, some of which can be managed or influenced by the council, but many of which are outside of the council's control. Officers review the various factors and seek to take the most appropriate action in each case.

Report author:

Helen Mole, Head of economic development, communications and marketing

Appendices:

- i. Risk Assessment
- ii. Equality Impact Assessment – Screening

Background information:

[Cabinet 19 September 2023](#)

[Cabinet 18 February 2025](#)

Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
1	The range of actions needed to support the town centre's resilience relies on factors both within and beyond the council's control. If the council cannot influence or manage a required action, then there is a risk that outcomes may be limited.	All relevant officers	3	3	9	Mitigate	Officers to understand: - what can be delivered by the council - what can be influenced by the council - what is outside of the council's control Officers use this knowledge to focus activities and partnership relationships to maximise impact.	All relevant officers	Ongoing
2	If public and partners do not commit to or engage in the activities highlighted in this report, then it will lead to a lack of progress and achievement of the objectives.	All relevant officers	2	2	4	Mitigate	Town centre stakeholders are committed to supporting the town centre. Council officers continue to monitor and work with partners. Communication and promotion of the public facing activities is	All relevant officers	Ongoing

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
							essential to ensure engagement and awareness from members of the public.		
3	If media coverage is mostly negative about the town centre, it could harm how people perceive the town and lead to lower visitor, business and resident confidence, as well as making it harder to attract new business and investment.	All relevant officers	2	2	4	Mitigate	Press articles are issued about successes. Strong positive brand messaging from Visit Cheltenham and partners Council to share information about statistics to show the reality of the town centre (see note about vacancy rate vs perception of this)	All relevant officers	Ongoing

Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment (Screening)

1. Identify the policy, project, function or service change

a. Person responsible for this Equality Impact Assessment

Officer responsible: Helen Mole

Service Area: Economic development, comms & marketing

Title: Head of economic development, comms & marketing

Date of assessment: 23/6/26

Signature: *H Mole*

b. Is this a policy, function, strategy, service change or project?

Service

If other, please specify:

c. Name of the policy, function, strategy, service change or project

Town centre support and vacant units action plan

Is this new or existing?

Other

Please specify reason for change or development of policy, function, strategy, service change or project

Update on existing activities

d. What are the aims, objectives and intended outcomes and who is likely to benefit from it?

Aims:

To highlight the work being carried out by the council and partners to support the town centre

Objectives:

To promote the town centre
To support businesses
To ensure Cheltenham is a safe and welcoming place to spend time

Outcomes:

Review of ongoing activity

Benefits:	A thriving and well-maintained centre supports wellbeing, encourages footfall and investment, and underpins confidence in the wider local economy. Ensuring its continued vitality is therefore essential not only for businesses, but also for residents, visitors, and the long-term prosperity of Cheltenham.

e. What are the expected impacts?

Are there any aspects, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could have an impact on the lives of people, including employees and customers.

No

Do you expect the impacts to be positive or negative?

No impact expected

Please provide an explanation for your answer:

The activities set out in this report will be subject to their own equality assessments. This report is updating on work being carried out.

If your answer to question e identified potential positive or negative impacts, or you are unsure about the impact, then you should carry out a Stage Two Equality Impact Assessment.

f. Identify next steps as appropriate

Stage Two required

No

Owner of Stage Two assessment

Completion date for Stage Two assessment