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Magazine of the Year – winner

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Sponsored by two-time Shropshire Company of the Year winner McPhillips, there's a new episode every fortnight… you can find us on Spotify, Apple, Podbean, or listen on ***shropshirebiz.com***

THE SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS PODCAST















SHROPSHIRE
BUSINESS

Resilience, Reality and Reasons for Optimism

The sad loss of Shrewsbury Food Festival serves as a sobering reminder of the pressures facing many businesses and event organisers across our county right now.

After more than a decade of award-winning success, organisers cited rising operating costs, increasing compliance requirements and pressure on consumers' disposable income as key factors behind the difficult decision to bring the event to an end.

While the loss of such a high-profile showcase will undoubtedly be felt by residents, visitors and the wider local economy, it also highlights a much bigger conversation.

Across the hospitality, tourism and events sectors, employers continue to navigate significant financial challenges. Rising employment costs, increased supplier charges, higher energy bills and growing regulatory requirements are all adding pressure at a time when many consumers remain cautious about spending.

Successful businesses and organisations cannot be taken for granted. They need the right environment, the right support and the confidence to invest in the future.

And yet, if there is one theme that runs through this edition, it is resilience.

Take our coverage of the third annual Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards. More than just a celebration of individual achievement, the awards showcased something fundamental to the county's long-term success: investment in people. Record entries and representation from an increasingly diverse range of sectors provided compelling evidence that employers remain committed to developing talent despite the economic pressures they face.

The stories of apprentices overcoming personal challenges, employers investing in future skills, and mentors helping shape careers offer a powerful reminder that economic growth starts with people. At a time when conversations are dominated by skills shortages and workforce challenges, there is something encouraging about seeing so many businesses putting their faith in the next generation.

Elsewhere, we examine a vital topic for our country – the future of our towns and high streets.

The visit by Ian Harvey, head of the Institute of Place Management, highlighted how Wellington's regeneration story is attracting national attention. His observations about partnership working, community pride and entrepreneurial spirit underline an important lesson for towns everywhere.

Successful places are rarely transformed by a single organisation or funding programme. Instead, they succeed when businesses, local leaders and communities work together towards a shared vision.

That spirit of adaptation features prominently in our special report from the Halls Commercial property event in Shrewsbury which I had the pleasure of hosting.

While speakers acknowledged ongoing concerns around borrowing costs, taxation and economic uncertainty, there was also discussion around emerging opportunities. From infrastructure investment and regional development to changing patterns of commercial demand, the message was clear: the market continues to evolve, and those prepared to adapt will be best placed to succeed.

Perhaps that is what links so many of the stories in this magazine. They are examples of adaptation. Of employers developing new skills. Of towns reinventing themselves. Of investors seeking opportunities in changing markets. Of entrepreneurs continuing to create, innovate and grow despite the challenges around them.

The closure of the Food Festival is undoubtedly disappointing. It serves as a reminder that economic pressures are very real and that even successful events and organisations are not immune to them.

But it is only one part of the story. The bigger picture emerging from this edition is of a county that continues to evolve. A county rich in entrepreneurial spirit, practical innovation and community determination, where challenges are acknowledged, but where optimism and ambition remain firmly intact.

As always, those are the stories we are proud to tell.

By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor



Keith Winter and Lee Gilbert discussing the Budget



Naomi Atkin talking with Chris Pritchard



Mel Board, Ruth Ross, and Elena Fenton



Stuart Mackenzie from McPhillips with Delia Yapp

Breathing space today… but will it deliver any growth tomorrow?

John Healey's first Budget promised breathing space and hope for the future. But did it live up to the needs and expectations of the Shropshire business community? CARL JONES and ADAM PRINGLE report

Half way through the Budget speech, it looked like Chancellor John Healey was running out of steam.

Businesses who had gathered at Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's Telford headquarters to watch and discuss the speech thought he was preparing to wrap things up early. On he went – though anyone expecting a game-changing rabbit to be pulled from the hat was left disappointed.

The unanimous view of employers was that this was a cautious, largely forgettable package which tried to balance cost-of-living support with fiscal discipline, while seeking to avoid major tax rises on working people. And kicking some major cans decisively down the road.

The central question was always going to be whether the Chancellor could create conditions that encourage investment. Across manufacturing, professional services, retail and construction, employers consistently argue that uncertainty remains one of the biggest barriers to growth.

Shropshire companies making decisions on recruitment, expansion and capital investment typically want a predictable tax environment and clear economic direction. In recent years, frequent changes to business taxation and support schemes have created challenges for long-term planning.

Around the table at the Chamber, preparing to take part in a special edition of the Shropshire Business podcast, were Delia Yapp and Lee Gilbert from reigning Shropshire Company of the Year Fowler & Gilbert, of Market Drayton.

They were joined by Stuart Mackenzie of McPhillips, Gareth Jones from In-Comm Training, Keith Winter of Dyke Yaxley, Elena Fenton from the Albrighton Hall Hotel & Spa, Naomi Atkin from Lingen Davies, and Shropshire Chamber duo Ruth Ross and Liz Keirle.



The Shropshire Business Podcast was recorded immediately after the Budget speech

"The Chancellor described it as a Budget to give us more breathing space – but I'm not sure businesses will be feeling any of that," said Ruth.

"This was a Budget that tried to send all the right signals to business, but lacked the sort of big calls that would really make a difference. There really wasn't anything in there providing direct support to businesses at all."

She said the decision to increase small business rate relief from £12,000 to £18,000 would be welcomed by many retailers in Shropshire's market towns, and most sectors would be pleased to have avoided any further taxes being piled upon them.

But she added: "Overall, there was nothing to release the shackles on investment or boost confidence. There is no doubt that many firms in Shropshire will have been hoping for a greater impact.

"There were several positive steps outlined, including Founders Relief and significant reductions or the complete removal of business rates for many in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

"Additional funding for AI, increased finance through the National Wealth Fund and British Business Bank will also offer new opportunities for entrepreneurs to start and scale up.

"But on the other side, inflation and taxation remain the biggest concerns in Shropshire Chamber's quarterly economic survey, along with concerns over the rising National Minimum Wage. None of that has been alleviated by this speech."

Stuart Mackenzie of civil engineering firm McPhillips declared himself 'a little bit annoyed' by what he had heard. "Projects and infrastructure schemes which were mentioned during the speech were all things that had been mentioned before – probably for the last two or three years.

"We really need assurance of new infrastructure projects where growth can be achieved. It gives every business the chance to see where opportunities are, to be building on our own doorstep."

Naomi Atkin of Lingen Davies reflected on the way the speech pinpointed metro mayors as key funnels for economic investment – something which could leave Shropshire on the outside looking in.

"I'm all for devolution to give local communities more say on how their funds are spent, but the risk to areas like Shropshire Telford & Wrekin – and Powys in Mid Wales where we also work – is that they get left behind, completely sidelined and almost forgotten."

The Chancellor recognised the need to support fast-growing businesses which took risks, which certainly applies to Fowler & Gilbert, specialising in custom made steel frame buildings for agricultural, equestrian, industrial and commercial sectors. So, were the team enthused by what they heard?

Delia Yapp said: "It was a relatively safe Budget. We all understand the difficult situation the Government is in; there's not a lot of funding around. But I was hoping for a lot more positivity.

"We are an expanding company, and we are looking to invest – I would like to have seen more incentives to try to encourage us to do that."

The Chancellor pledged to freeze most building regulations this parliament and exempt brownfield sites from biodiversity net gain rules – which was one of the key takeaways for Lee Gilbert.

"We've already gone through a pretty big pain process with that, and I don't think anything that has been announced here is going to help us going forward. We have multiple businesses in multiple sectors; construction wise it would have been nice to see it given a bit more focus on where we are heading.

"From a farming perspective, I'd have liked to have seen a focus on promoting home-grown produce, which means farmers aren't really looking to invest – which impacts our business.

"But my biggest worry of all is the minimum wage increase, which is a massive issue. We do a lot with apprenticeships, T Levels, and people just wanting to learn a trade and a career – but this is going to be incredibly difficult to keep bringing the next generation through in the same way with the minimum wage rises. It puts you off bringing in new talent or younger people to train up from scratch."

Gareth Jones of In-Comm Training picked up this thread: "To have a strong economy you have got to be making products, and support the people that are doing it. These businesses have taken a massive hit over the past couple of years – hikes in National Insurance come right off our bottom line, which is cash we have to find from somewhere.

"And then we talk about the relationship between education and industry. We all know about the seriousness of the NEET situation – people not in education, employment or training – and there was very little in this speech about the collaboration to tackle it.

"With all these added costs, many businesses have got to go into AI or automation to become more productive and competitive on a regional, national or global market. That means a lot of entry level jobs are going. There are fewer opportunities for people entering these industries; the skill base of what's required by manufacturing companies is changing."

He said his business had been planning to take on 10 new staff this year, but hadn't been able to do so because of the need to manage costs. "We simply haven't got the bandwidth to take risks or invest into tomorrow, because we're too busy looking after today."

Some of the most significant measures in the Chancellor's speech for businesses included an increase in the rates relief threshold for retail, hospitality and leisure operators.

> Many have expressed disappointment that the Budget stopped short of more ambitious tax reforms

There were real-terms freezes on business rates for other firms, and news of a British Industrial Competitiveness Scheme which will cut electricity costs by 25% for around 10,000 energy-intensive businesses.

Mr Healey announced a retention of full-expensing on capital allowances, a tripling of the tax-free trading allowance from £1,000 to £3,000 for smaller and side businesses, and new support for entrepreneurs and start-up founders.

The hospitality industry has had things particularly tough since the pandemic, and Elena Fenton from the Albrighton Hall Hotel & Spa near Shrewsbury felt there was nothing in the speech that would turn the tide.

"The minimum wage rise is going to put further pressure on what is already a really difficult situation. As an old listed property, we wanted to put solar panels up, but have been told we can't. There are no funding incentives. We are trying to be more sustainable, but we have no support as our costs are rising.

"Hospitality is really struggling, and I didn't find any positivity – or any of that breathing space that the chancellor mentioned – for the people that work in our sector. I want to be positive, but it is very difficult."

Keith Winter, from Dyke Yaxley accountants, has spent his entire career analysing budgets and balance sheets. So where does this one rank?

"I was obviously looking out mostly for the tax angles, and the investment allowance on first-year capital expenditure is being cut. At the moment the first £1 million can be set against your profits, but this is being reduced to £500,000. That was a bit of a surprise, and perhaps won't encourage people to buy new equipment.

"Increasing the levy on banks by three per cent to pay for some of his announcements was not unexpected, but I was surprised by some of the other decisions on capital allowances."

Keith said the new capital gains tax relief for business founders, charging 10 per cent on lifetime gains of up to £10 million, was 'potentially fairly massive', but questioned how the scheme would work in practice. "How exactly do you define a founder? I look forward to seeing the smallprint."

He added: "Increasing the small business rate relief from £12,000 to £18,000 is certainly going to help a lot of businesses in our market towns like Shrewsbury, who will see their rates bills reduced."

The Federation of Small Businesses has welcomed measures designed to reduce operating costs and improve cash flow, while manufacturing groups say they are encouraged by the announcement of reduced industrial electricity costs.

But many have expressed disappointment that the Budget stopped short of more ambitious tax reforms, wider reductions in employer costs, or any changes to the benefits bill.

And the banking sector is expected to push back against the temporary doubling of the banking surcharge, arguing that it risks reducing competitiveness at a time when investment remains crucial for growth

News headlines suggest that many of the area's larger employers are seriously considering shifting production abroad to cut costs – and the consensus among the podcast panellists was that nothing had been presented which would reverse those trends.

Statistics show that costs imposed on SMEs as a direct result of UK Government policies has risen by a staggering 70% in the past decade.

So, will the Chancellor's attempted balancing act be enough to stimulate growth while avoiding further pressure on public finances? Based on the evidence of the Shropshire Business Podcast panel, local business leaders clearly have grave doubts.

Listen to the special Budget reaction edition of the Shropshire Business Podcast on Apple, Amazon, Spotify, or Podbean

BUDGET 2026: Employers have their say



Helen Watson



Anton Gunter



A working lunch for the team from WR Partners studying Budget announcements



Carl Huntley



Helen Cooper



Alasdair Coutts-Britton

◀ “A 3.9% rise in the National Living Wage will be welcomed by millions of workers, but employers will now need to look carefully at what the increase means alongside everything else that’s coming their way. For some smaller firms, that could mean a real brake on hiring. If recruitment or expansion starts to slow as a result, that would sit uneasily with the Government’s ambition to get businesses growing and creating jobs."

Helen Watson,
head of employment at Aaron & Partners

“There was little to truly scare the horses and some positive news – such as the £100 help with energy bills and the extension of the cut to VAT on electricity bills. Business also benefitted with the new tax relief for the founders of successful firms and the raising of the business rates threshold for many small businesses. But in general I get the feeling this was designed neither to please nor offend, but simply to mark time.”

Jon Simcock,
Shropshire strategic communications expert

“We certainly welcome the extra £1.5bn support Mr Healey outlined for social and affordable housing in England today and the wider borrowing powers for regional leaders to help deliver new homes.

"The new Your First Home scheme should stimulate activity at the lower end of the housing ladder, but the Mansion Tax will have the opposite effect at the other end.”

Carl Huntley,
Base Architects, Shrewsbury

"While there are some welcome measures aimed at supporting investment and economic stability – particularly around defence – I don't believe this Budget goes far enough to unlock the full potential of British manufacturing. Businesses like ours are ambitious. We want to invest, recruit and export, but we need a policy environment that gives us the confidence to do all that.”

Graham Corfield,
chief executive of manufacturer Aviramp,



Graham Corfield



Jon Simcock

"I don't think this was ever going to be anything more than a steady-as-you-go Budget because Mr Healey simply did not have many options available to him. The increase in the threshold for business rates is good news for pubs, clubs and restaurants, and the decision not to go ahead with the cut to the amount people can put into a cash ISA was less predictable but certainly welcome.”

Alasdair Coutts-Britton,
Una Vita Financial Planning in Oswestry.

“Where is the budget for business and business growth? So now Telford & Wrekin Council can keep more of my business rates to do even less with. Why did the Chancellor not reduce duty on fuel? Here we go again… not a lot of substance and certainly nothing about defence spending.

“Best get that water, wind up radio and candles ready.”

Anton Gunter,
Global Freight Services

“There were undoubtedly some positive announcements such as the help for first-time buyers and the cuts to business rates, but I would have liked to have seen more to support small businesses.

“It is these businesses which employ the majority of people in this country and which drive the nation’s economic growth and it is all too easy to take them for granted.”

Helen Cooper ,
Turas Accountants, Telford

“I’m pleased to see £100 million committed to a local apprenticeship service that will match young people with local firms.

“Apprenticeships are one of the best routes into skilled work and helping young people find opportunities with employers on their doorstep is a key part of our partnership working with businesses in Telford.”

Lawrence Wood,
principal and chief executive of Telford College



Lawrence Wood



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Building to BREEAM

Morris Property recently completed a largescale commercial project at Hortonwood 45 in Telford, Shropshire earning BREEAM Very Good accreditation. As the construction arm of Morris & Company, a fifth-generation property business with a sizeable track record and portfolio within the Midlands property market, building to the BREEAM standard meets the company's ambitions for creating high quality commercial schemes of scale.



Chris Morris.

The design and build project commissioned by parent company Morris & Company was to create an impressive distribution/industrial warehouse facility on its 11.2 acre site in Telford - their 12th build project in the Hortonwood area. The company had elected to build to BREEAM standard for the expansive, 100,000 sq ft unit, a move which has earnt them a coveted Very Good accreditation.

Family board director Chris Morris reflects on the experience: "As a family business our philosophy has always been based on delivering quality product - something which also sits at the heart of the BREEAM framework.

"As an active developer in the region, we understand the local commercial landscape and saw the opportunity at our site in Hortonwood to create an offer which would stand apart from much of the competition in terms of the social impact of the build and its sustainability credentials."

James West, Head of Construction at Morris Property expanded: "We were excited to take on the additional challenges this building programme poses and identified our senior quantity surveyor to take the lead. QS Alex Morris jumped at the chance to champion the positive impact this accreditation delivers."

"Looking back now the build is complete, I can see that building to this standard requires extensive problem solving, which is an element of my role that I personally really enjoy. From originating new documentation, such as creating user guides for tenants, to the forensic breakdown of material supply chains to ensure compliance, all sat at the heart of what we had to achieve" Alex commented.

"A big question to wrestle with before we began was the value over cost of a BREEAM build" commented James.

"The BRE estimate it's on average 8 to 12 % increase in building value once received (dependant on factors like location, competition and market conditions) but what is indisputable is the social value it brings. It also underpins our reputation as a quality operator and fits into our corporate carbon reduction strategy."

Hortonwood 45 benefits from a unique layout that prioritises green open space and the natural environment. It features a 20,000 m^2 landscaping scheme - twice the size of the actual building footprint - which absorbs 920 tonnes of CO2 a year.

Completion of this speculative build and its subsequent letting to Hager, a UK and European market leader in electrical distribution equipment, is testament to the commercial appetite for high-quality buildings of scale.

Chris Morris reflected: "We are by no means considering BREEAM for every building plot we procure, the conditions need to be right and appropriate. Hortonwood 45 was exactly the right project. The valuable knowledge and skillsets gained through the process enabled us to secure an excellent tenant in Hager who were looking for a building of this calibre and integrity."

Alex Morris added: "It was definitely a shared responsibility across our business. Luckily we have the full property orchestra here at Morris with our estates, development, capital investment, marketing and admin leads all involved in supporting this project. As such it has felt like being the conductor bringing in all these specialisms together to help us gain the accreditation."



Morris Property Senior Team: L-R James West, Pete Roach, Alex Morris and Jason Postans.

Ketley Point transformation gathers pace

The regeneration of Ketley Point in Telford has reached a major milestone with Aldi opening its new store on Waterloo Road, following completion of the building by Morris.

Built on the former Shropshire Star office and printworks site, the development is breathing new life into a landmark location, transforming the brownfield site into a vibrant commercial destination and creating local employment opportunities.

The Aldi store is the first completed phase of the five acre scheme, which also includes a 45,898 sq ft distribution warehouse, Unit B, currently available for sale and due for completion later this year. The new industrial unit will provide high-quality commercial space for occupiers looking to invest and grow in Telford.

Liz Lowe, Head of Development at Morris Property, said: "The handover of Aldi marks an important step in the transformation of Ketley Point.

"This development is creating new opportunities for businesses, jobs and investment, and brings a well-known Telford site back into productive use."

Once complete, Ketley Point will deliver a significant boost to the local economy, combining retail and employment space in a strategic location, with excellent access to Junction 6 of the M54, which is just five minutes away.



From L-R Liz Lowe, Head of Development, Morris Property and Rebecca Dias, Real Estate Director, ALDI Stores Ltd at the new Aldi in Ketley, Telford.



Firm divides to conquer efficiency

Market Drayton-based waste management and agricultural contracting firm AR Richards has demerged its business in a move to improve operational efficiency.

Established in 1980, the company was started by local family Alyn, Anthony and Sheilagh Richards with a single Massey Ferguson 595 tractor hired to local farmers who required additional help with harvesting and cultivation.

It later diversified to provide waste management services and open its builders' merchants at Tern Hill, and employs 100 people.

The newly-formed AR Richards Group has two divisions – Richards Recycling incorporating the waste management, skip hire, aggregates and builders' merchant operations, and AR Richards, covering the agricultural contracting and plant hire division.



AR Richards Group now has two divisions

Finance director Sam Richards said: "Operating independently allows us to become more streamlined and agile in our functions, meaning we can respond to change and grow more effectively. We will remain as a family-run business and provide the same great level of customer service our loyal customers have come to expect."

For a 'captive' audience

Shropshire-made metal components are being used to help deliver a new robotic crop-picking product.

GWR Fasteners in Oswestry has supplied standard fasteners and stainless steel captive screws made for the project.

Details of the client and location are not being revealed for commercially-sensitive reasons, but the Shropshire company says it is an example of how it contributes to the supply chain for developing agricultural machinery.

"Whether building new agricultural machinery or repairing equipment already at work, getting the right fastener matters," said joint owner Jude Robinson.

"Captive screws are designed to remain with an assembly when loosened. For machinery builders and repairers, that can reduce the risk of losing a screw when a panel or component is opened for access or maintenance."

From its base at Artillery Business Park, GWR supplies customers across a wide range of sectors and continues to invest in British manufacturing, technology, people and skills.

Established during the 2008/09 recession, the business has grown from an operation based in an outhouse to a 10,000 sq ft premises supplying businesses and individuals throughout the UK and internationally.

It now makes precision components in-house using fixed-head and sliding-head CNC technology, alongside distributing an extensive range of standard, specialist and hard-to-find fasteners. GWR also supplies standard fasteners, bar materials, tooling and consumables.

Interest in agricultural automation continues to grow. In August 2026, the UK Government announced a £20 million competition to support the development of farm robots and automated systems, including technology to harvest crops.

GWR says it sees an opportunity to support the businesses making and maintaining this equipment.

The company attended Lincolnshire Agricultural Machinery Manufacturers Association (LAMMA) show earlier this year to learn more about the sector.





Above, the captive screws being used for robotic crop-picking; below, GWR manufacturing lead Dan Farrar in the Oswestry factory

Providing an opportunity to move forward confidently

Nock Deighton has strengthened its presence across south Shropshire and north Herefordshire following the acquisition of a rival property and lettings firm.

It has taken over Martin-Saunders Property Services Limited, which trades as Cobb Amos with branches in Ludlow, Leominster, Knighton and Hereford.

PKF Smith Cooper, which advised on the deal for an undisclosed sum, say it represents 'a positive outcome for employees, clients and landlords', securing the future of the business and safeguarding jobs.

Established in 1998, Martin-Saunders Property Services Limited has specialised in property sales, valuations, residential lettings and property management.

Following what it described as a period of challenging conditions across the property market and increasing operational costs, the company sought advice from PKF Smith Cooper's business recovery and restructuring team to explore its options.

As part of the sale to Nock Deighton, clients and landlords continue receiving services without interruption, and the current directors are joining the new company.

Dean Nelson, head of business recovery & restructuring at PKF Smith Cooper, said: "The transaction provides a strong platform for continued service to clients and landlords, while giving the team the opportunity to move forward with confidence.

"This outcome also highlights the value of seeking specialist advice at an early stage, which can help businesses identify and pursue positive solutions during periods of financial pressure. We wish the business and its team every success for the future."



Dean Nelson of PKF Smith Cooper

The PKF Smith Cooper team worked closely with Lewis Onions and Lauren Hartigan-Pritchard of Higgs LLP, who acted on behalf of the sellers.

Nock Deighton has several bases across Shropshire including Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Ironbridge Telford, Cleobury Mortimer and Bridgnorth.

Stepping out of the cold for partners

A specialist cryotherapy company is looking for physiotherapists, sports therapists and equine professionals interested in becoming partners for its range of equipment.

TruCryo based at the Rural Enterprise Centre in Shrewsbury, promotes localised cryotherapy – a targeted form of cold therapy where a controlled stream of cold CO_2 is applied to a specific area of the body.

It is designed to allow practitioners to incorporate cooling into an existing treatment or rehabilitation programme, such as physiotherapy, sports treatment and equine care, where cold therapy is already widely-used.

TruCryo is now looking to develop relationships with local and regional practitioners as it expands the availability of the system. Every TruCryo system will be supported by online training, treatment guidance and access to ongoing online chat and telephone support.



Cryotherapy is available in Shrewsbury

"The development name has always been the FRG – the Freeze Ray Gun – and it has proved to be a surprisingly accurate description," said Jason Peters, development lead at TruCryo.

"But the equipment is only part of what we're offering. We've deliberately built a support package that provides training, treatment guidance and a 24-hour response to technical queries; we want practitioners to be able to introduce localised cryotherapy properly into their existing businesses."

TruCryo said it was particularly interested in speaking to physiotherapists, sports injury clinics, rehabilitation specialists, equine therapists and other relevant practitioners keen to explore localised cryotherapy.



The Shropshire Festivals team behind Shropshire Business Festival



More than 800 people attended the event this year

Festival time for the business community

Shropshire's biggest business-to-business event will return for its fifth year in March, with organisers promising a refreshed format designed to get the county's business community talking.

Shropshire Business Festival will take place at Telford International Centre on March 11, bringing together more than 800 business owners, leaders and professionals for an afternoon of networking, workshops and activities.

The free event, organised by Shropshire Festivals, takes a different approach to traditional business networking, creating a relaxed environment where conversations and new connections can happen naturally.

For 2027, organisers are shaking up the format further. The previous Seminar Stage will be replaced by two new workshop areas, alongside the existing marketing workshop space. The change will allow several sessions to run across the afternoon, covering different areas of business and offering more practical content for attendees. Topics could range from the challenges facing small businesses to coaching and leadership sessions for CEOs and senior managers.

Beth Heath, director at Shropshire Festivals, said: "We've never wanted Shropshire Business Festival to feel like a traditional networking event. Nobody wants to spend an afternoon being talked at or awkwardly swapping business cards with people they never want to call.

> Around 60 businesses from across Shropshire and the wider West Midlands are expected to exhibit

"The whole idea is to make it easier to have meaningful conversations. We add plenty of fun and give people reasons to get talking, but ultimately, it's about helping businesses meet people they could genuinely work with.

"This will be our fifth Shropshire Business Festival, and it's brilliant to see how it has grown. More than 800 people joined us this year and, for 2027, we want to give them even more reasons to come along. We know businesses are looking for new customers, ideas and opportunities, and we want to create an afternoon where all three can happen."

Around 60 businesses from across Shropshire and the wider West Midlands are expected to exhibit, allowing visitors to discover new suppliers, services and potential partners.

A dedicated networking area will also provide a space for professionals to meet and develop new leads throughout the afternoon.

For exhibitors and sponsors, the festival offers an opportunity to put their businesses directly in front of hundreds of decision-makers, with stands designed to encourage conversation rather than simply handing out leaflets. Stands and sponsorship spaces sold out last year.

Stand applications are now open, while businesses and professionals can also secure their free visitor tickets. Tickets and stand applications are available at www.shropshirebusinessfestival.co.uk.





Star apprentices, mentors and employers across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin gathered for what was the biggest celebration so far

Simply the best

The third annual Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards proved to be the most spectacular and successful yet

It was the biggest celebration so far of star apprentices, mentors and employers across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

The competition drew employers, educators, training providers and community leaders together to champion the rising stars who are shaping the county's future workforce.

This year's sell-out awards night at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel – where a total of 13 champions were crowned – followed record numbers of entries, and more sectors represented than ever before.

But it wasn't just the size of the event that made this third year of the competition stand out – it was the quality.



Jake Burnett and Ellie Pjetri, the Telford & Wrekin and Shropshire apprentices of the year

The finalists reflected a level of professionalism, innovation and determination that speaks volumes about the strength of Shropshire's skills ecosystem.

From engineering and digital technologies to health, construction, creative industries and more, the awards showcased apprentices who are already making a measurable impact in their workplaces.

Ellie Pjetri – a human resources apprentice at Bridgnorth Aluminium – was the biggest winner on the night, picking up the overall Shropshire Apprentice of the Year title as well as the Business Legal & Finance apprentice trophy – the only candidate to take home two trophies.

The audience was told: "Ellie has willingly taken on responsibilities beyond those typically expected of an apprentice, and staff say her initiative has played a key role in making improvements to HR processes, pre-employment screening and management information reports.

"She has quickly become a valued and trusted member of the HR team who also now delivers career talks to those looking to follow in her footsteps."

Speaking immediately after receiving her trophies, Ellie said: "I can't believe it. I'm just shocked – I really didn't expect this. I wanted to do an apprenticeship because of the experience – you are learning and working at the same time. I'd like to do my level five qualification next, then hopefully move on to a level seven. I think I'm smashing it so far!"

She added: "The team at Bridgnorth Aluminium are really great. Everybody is lovely and supportive, and I've got along with them all right from the start."

The Bridgnorth Aluminium team said: "We're all absolutely over the moon for Ellie and couldn't be more proud to have her as part of our team."

The overall Telford & Wrekin Apprentice of the Year title went to Jake Burnett from Housing Plus Group, a health and social care apprentice described as 'an absolute star who brings positivity to every shift'.

In the employer categories, refrigeration specialist Hoshizaki of Telford won the Large Employer of the Year award, iconsys of Telford was medium sized employer champion, and the small employer prize went to Ruby Vehicle Services of Pennerley. ▶

Relive the highlights of the 2026 Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards by watching the full highlights on the Shropshire Business Live TV YouTube channel



Sophie Woodward receives the Health andSocial Care trophy from Faye Middle, of category sponsor Keele University



Henry Hunt from RBSL is presented with the Manufacturing trophy by Paul Hodgetts of In-Comm



Robert Lees of Telford College presents Ellie Pjetri with the Shropshire Apprentice of the Year trophy



The team from Purple Frog Data



Hoshizaki Europe wins Large Employer of the Year – pictured with Jules Rhodes of Shrewsbury College



The Marches Careers Hub table



Ruby Vehicle Services of Pennerley, Small Employer of the Year, receiving the trophy from Stuart Bishop of McPhillips



Steven Owen of Pave Aways presents the Medium Employer of the Year award to iconsys



Kate Taylor of ABP with Rising Star winner Amy Williams



Master of Ceremonies Carl Jones



Luke Plimmer, IT and Digital Industries winner, receives the trophy from Hollie Whittles of Purple Frog Data



Mark Allsop presents the Business Legal and Finance Award to Ellie Pjetri



Celebrations for the 2026 award winners



Lots to smile about on the Hoshizaki table



Wayne Gethings of Housing Plus Group with Construction Apprentice of the Year Michael Cardwell

◀ Other big winners included Amy Williams of Dawley Medical Practice, who became the inaugural recipient of the Rising Star award, while Housing Plus Group's Ryan Donegani was named Mentor of the Year.

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's marketing manager Ella Preece won Creative and Media Apprentice of the Year, and the Construction and Civil Engineering award went to Michael Cardwell of CQS Solutions.

Luke Plimmer of Start Tech in Shrewsbury collected the IT and Digital Industries award, Henry Hunt from RBSL in Telford was Manufacturing Apprentice of the Year, and Sophie Woodward from Coverage Care won the Health and Social Care category.

The competition was once again organised and delivered by the independent media team behind Shropshire Business Live TV, which filmed the event for broadcast over the coming days.

This year's event was backed by some of the county's biggest and best names, led by headline sponsor Telford College, and the Marches Careers Hub.

Category sponsors included Keele University, In-Comm Training, J&PR, iconsys, ABP UK, Shrewsbury College, McPhillips, Housing Plus Group, Pave Aways, and Purple Frog Data.

Mark Allsop of Baxter Production, part of the organising committee, said: "The event just gets bigger and better every year, and is such an inspirational, uplifting, feel good occasion.

> This year's event was backed by some of the county's biggest and best names, led by headline sponsor Telford College, and the Marches Careers Hub

"The quality and volume of entries once again surpassed expectations, and our panel of independent judges wanted to let finalists know how difficult their decisions had been.

"We're incredibly grateful to all the sponsors who have supported us and made this fantastic event possible once again."

Construction winner Michael Cardwell ran his own joinery and manufacturing business for 12 years before being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis – but was determined to remain in the construction industry and is now undertaking a degree apprenticeship with CQS Solutions and Wrexham University.

He continues to serve as a retained crew manager in the fire service, and said: "I am thrilled to bits to win this award. I cannot thank CQS Solutions enough for the opportunity to join their team and for the support both they and Wrexham University have given me with my studies.

"To be able to combine working on the job with my university work and learn so much from my colleagues at work has been a fantastic experience." ▶



Guests on the Hoshizaki table



Paul Roberts, Simon Badley, and Paul Jones from Learning Community Trust



The team from headline sponsor Telford College



Carl Jones interviewing the two overall Apprentice of the Year winners



Guests on the Bridgnorth Aluminium table



Mentor of the Year Ryan Donegani with Milissa Chesters of sponsor iconsys





Housing Plus Group staff and guests



Sarah Davies of Telford College presents Jake Burnett with the Telford & Wrekin Apprentice of the Year trophy



A round of applause as another winner is announced

◀ Milissa Chesters of iconsys said: “We were also incredibly proud to be named Medium Employer of the Year. This award recognises the commitment iconsys has made to apprenticeships and to creating meaningful opportunities for people to learn, develop their skills and build long-term careers with us.

“It also reflects the support provided by managers, mentors and colleagues across the business who help our apprentices to grow in confidence and apply their learning in a real working environment.”

Housing Plus Group was delighted with its success.

Apprentice housing and care assistant Jake Burnett – who was crowned Telford & Wrekin Apprentice of the Year having also reached the final of the health and social care category – was praised by judges for his dedication, compassion and commitment to supporting people with disabilities and complex needs, describing him as an absolute star who brings positivity to every shift.

Jake, who has been at Housing Plus Group for just over a year, said he was ‘a bit shocked, speechless and overwhelmed’ to win the Telford & Wrekin award.

> The winner of the other new award this year, Amy Williams, was nominated for the Rising Star award because of her remarkable transformation

“The best thing about my job is seeing the reaction of the residents I look after. I hope to move onto my level three, then four and five, and keep moving up.”

Asked about the best thing about an apprenticeship, he said: “It’s the experience. I feel you learn a lot more when you are actually doing the job, compared with just on a screen, or in books. I’ve had loads of support from my team.”

Housing Plus Group’s advanced craft electrician Ryan Donegani took home the Mentor of the Year award in recognition of the outstanding support he provides to apprentices, helping them build confidence, develop their skills and reach their potential.

The audience was told: “Ryan was nominated by apprentices he has supported . . . and they praised the extraordinary impact he has had on their personal and professional development.

“He is praised for his pastoral care, teamwork and communication skills, and for embodying the Housing Trust Group’s values.”

The winner of the other new award this year, Amy Williams, was nominated for the Rising Star award because of her remarkable transformation, resilience, and contribution throughout her apprenticeship at Dawley Medical Practice.

Before starting her apprenticeship, she was a full-time college learner who was struggling to find her place in education or employment. ▶

All of that changed when she switched to an apprenticeship.

The audience heard: “What makes her journey deserving of recognition, according to staff, is her determination to improve and overcome challenges, gaining confidence and professionalism in the workplace.

“Her project on improving processes to reduce time and increase efficiency has delivered clear benefits to patients.”

Ian Groves of Start Tech said: “I'm really proud of our track record with apprenticeships over the years, and it's brilliant to see Luke get recognition for his hard work.

> The finalists reflected a level of professionalism, innovation and determination that speaks volumes about the strength of Shropshire’s skills ecosystem

“But the real take-away for me from the event, as someone who works in technology and surrounded by discussions about AI, is how important it is for businesses to keep supporting young people. A representative from one of the local colleges got up and said that education can’t do this alone, and that really struck a chord with me. We’ve had apprentices for about 20 years now, and we’ve had team members who have stayed with us long after their apprenticeships ended.



Luke Plimmer with his Start Tech colleagues



Guests enjoying the awards ceremony at the Mercure Telford Centre hotel



Ella Preece of Shropshire Chamber receives the Creative and Media award from Rhea Alton of J&PR



Andriane Usherwood-Brown from Marches Careers Hub



David Moreton and Sarah Davies from Telford College took part in a Q&A

“Now more than ever, when we talk about the impact of AI on people getting into their careers, it’s vital that businesses support programmes such as T Levels and apprenticeships.”

Creative and media winner Ella Preece, who has already been promoted to marketing manager at Shropshire Chamber, said: "Going up on that stage was a bit surreal. I’m normally behind the camera capturing these moments, not being in them. It feels great to be recognised for my achievements so early on in my career."

She was praised for her creativity, professionalism, and rapid development since joining the Chamber in 2023.

Jenny Pearson, head of commercial success at Shropshire Chamber, said: "We’re so proud of Ella’s achievements. Her creativity, professionalism, and rapid development have had a transformative impact on the Chamber’s media output and engagement. She joined us with a clear passion for creative communication and has exceeded expectations."

The evening had begun with on-stage Q&A sessions with headline sponsors Telford College, and associate supporters Marches Careers Hub.

Telford College’s executive director of employer engagement and partnerships Sarah Davies, and head of apprenticeships David Moreton, explained the range of 20-plus apprenticeships on offer, the ‘learner journey’ for apprentices, and the need for training providers to ensure they are in tune with employer demand.

Andriane Usherwood-Brown from Marches Careers Hub explained her organisation’s current push on boosting skills pathways – promoting technical and vocational opportunities and ensuring that young people are developing the skills required to take them up.





Engineering the Future, Together

Proud winners of Medium Employer of the Year 2026

At iconsys, we believe the future of engineering starts with investing in people.

Apprenticeships play a vital role in developing the next generation of engineers, combining hands-on experience with technical knowledge, fresh ideas and the skills our industry needs to thrive.

For us, apprenticeships are more than a route into employment. They're an opportunity to nurture talent, share expertise and build rewarding, long-term careers. That's why we're incredibly proud to be recognised as **Medium Employer of the Year** at the 2026 Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards.

We also know that behind every successful apprentice is someone willing to guide, encourage and inspire. Sponsoring the new **Mentor of the Year Award** was our way of recognising those who give their time and knowledge to help others succeed.

Congratulations to Ryan Donegani, a truly deserving winner, and to everyone helping shape the future of engineering.

Apprenticeship Awards
THE 2026 WINNERS

Shropshire Apprentice of the Year:
Ellie Pjetri, Bridgnorth Aluminium

Telford & Wrekin Apprentice of the Year:
Jake Burnett, Housing Plus Group

Manufacturing & Engineering:
Henry Hunt, RBSL

IT & Digital Industries:
Luke Plimmer, Start Tech

Health & Social Care:
Sophie Woodward, Coverage Care

Construction & Civil Engineering:
Michael Cardwell, CQS Solutions

Business, Legal & Finance:
Ellie Pjetri, Bridgnorth Aluminium

Creative & Media:
Ella Preece, Shropshire Chamber of Commerce

Rising Star:
Amy Williams, Dawley Medical Practice

Mentor of the Year:
Ryan Donegani, Housing Plus Group

Small Employer:
Ruby Vehicle Services, Pennerley

Medium Employer:
iconsys, Telford

Large Employer:
Hoshizaki Europe, Telford



There were some popular winners on the night



Zoe Lawson and Ellie Hendley



Ella Preece and Jenny Pearson



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Shropshire Chamber of Commerce

Platform for further success

The owners of Shrewsbury Prison have signed a deal to acquire The Buttermarket – one of Shropshire's most established and recognisable entertainment venues.

Shrewsbury-based Cove Group will officially take control of the town centre venue from January after agreeing a deal with long-time owner Martin Monahan.

They say the venue will retain its established identity, existing team and successful entertainment programme, while benefiting from additional commercial expertise, investment and opportunities for future growth.

Cove Group says the acquisition creates an exciting opportunity for collaboration with Shrewsbury Prison with the potential to develop new events, corporate experiences, hospitality offerings and partnerships to strengthen the town's visitor and entertainment economy.

Joel Campbell, founder and chief executive of Cove Group, said: "This is an incredibly exciting moment for Cove Group and for Shrewsbury.

"The Buttermarket is a fantastic business with a brilliant reputation, an established customer base and enormous potential. Martin and his team have created something really special, and our ambition is to build on everything that makes The Buttermarket successful while introducing new ideas, experiences and opportunities.

"What makes this acquisition particularly exciting is how naturally it complements our existing businesses, especially Shrewsbury Prison. We have a real opportunity to bring together entertainment, hospitality, events and experiences in ways that will benefit both businesses and, importantly, the town itself.

"We have ambitious plans for The Buttermarket, but we're equally committed to protecting what people already love about it. This is about building on its success, supporting its people and creating an even more exciting future."

Cove Group will be retaining the existing Buttermarket management team, ensuring continuity for customers, performers, promoters and commercial partners while developing its longer-term plans.



A new chapter for The Buttermarket – Joel Campbell and Martin Monahan outside the venue

Martin Monahan said: "The Buttermarket has been a huge part of my life, and I'm incredibly proud of what we've achieved here and the reputation we've built.

"When considering the future of the venue, it was really important to me that it went to someone who understands its potential, appreciates what makes it special and has the ambition to take it forward.

"Joel and Cove Group have some fantastic ideas, and I'm genuinely excited about what the future holds. I'll be working closely with Joel and the team to ensure a smooth transition, and I'm looking forward to seeing the venue continue to grow and succeed."



Incentives for taking on apprentices

Telford College is encouraging businesses to make the most of new incentives which have been introduced for taking on apprentices.

The college has people ready and waiting to start, with placements needed across a range of sectors, specifically around accountancy and finance, HR, software development, manufacturing, property maintenance, and electrical.

Sarah Davies, executive director of employer engagement and partnerships, said: "We speak to employers all the time who are struggling to find people with the right skills, and these incentives make it easier and more affordable for them to train their own.

"Our young people are ready and waiting.

"They want to learn on the job, earn a wage and build a career, and an apprenticeship lets an employer shape that person around the way its business works."

Three incentives are on offer. All employers can claim £1,000 when they take on an apprentice aged 16 to 18, or aged 19 to 24 if an Education, Health and Care Plan is in place.

Small and medium-sized employers can also claim £2,000 for each new apprentice aged 16 to 24.

On top of this, the Government's Youth Jobs Grant pays employers up to £3,000 when they hire someone aged 18 to 24 who has been claiming universal credit and looking for work for at least six months.

● ***Employers interested in finding out more should call 01952 642452 or email businesssolutions@telfordcollege.ac.uk***



The college has people waiting to take up apprenticeships

Training plus education opportunities for all ages

A Telford College 'shop' designed to improve skills and boost job prospects for people in the town has opened its doors.

The Skills Shop, based in Telford's main indoor shopping centre, offers training and education opportunities for people of all ages, while also showcasing what the college has to offer to learners and employers.

A range of services are on offer, including a new retail and hospitality academy, which will offer support and courses for businesses in the town.

Staff are available to support with apprenticeships, career advice and guidance, with adult learning opportunities on offer, as well as employer engagement activities, recruitment support services and wider community outreach programmes.

The college says the Skills Shop puts the college in the heart of Telford, in a place where people come to shop and spend their time.

"We want anyone who walks past to feel they can come in, ask a question and make the next move, whether that be towards a first qualification or a career change," said Sarah Davies, executive director for employer engagement and partnerships.

"It gives us a front door in the town centre and we're really excited about what this new shop can bring, not just to young people in Telford, but people of all ages when it comes to boosting skills and workforce development."



Telford College's Business Solutions team outside the new Skills Shop

Glynn Morrow, manager of Telford Centre, added: "The skills shop is a great addition here at Telford Centre. It creates a greater accessibility for customers to access services, new employment opportunities and the chance to upskill in different areas of business, retail and industry."

The shop, which is open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 2pm on Saturdays, also offers other vocational learning opportunities.

Love the pub? Use it or lose it

A new report reveals that Shropshire has lost more than 12% of its pubs since 2010 – highlighting the growing challenges of running hospitality-based businesses in rural areas.

The study, which analysed Office for National Statistics counts of pubs and bars across Great Britain, revealed that 50 pubs closed across the county during the period, taking the total down to 340.

It is broadly in line with the decline across the whole of the West Midlands region, where the pub count fell from 3,990 in 2010 to 3,430 last year.

Shropshire sits 87th of the 144 places on a national list that runs from the biggest percentage fall in pubs to the biggest rise.

James Byrne from The Punters Page which commissioned the survey, said: "The local has long been where people gather to watch the football, the racing and the big fights together, and every closure takes that shared room away from a town or village.

"If your area still has a pub, the best way to keep it is to use it, from match days to quiz nights, as a busy pub is far harder to close than a quiet one."

One Shropshire pub preparing for a new chapter right now is the Crown & Anchor Vaults in Bishop's Castle, which is currently up for sale.



The Crown and Anchor in Bishop's Castle is currently on the market

The historic Grade II listed pub, which dates back to the mid-19th century, has an annual turnover of £200,000 and is on the market with property agent Sidney Phillips for £420,000.

The pub has been run by the same management for over 20 years, and comes complete with three separate self-contained flats.

The industry has come under increasing pressure from a combination of economic and social factors in recent times.

Pub operators have faced increasing bills for energy, business rates, insurance, wages and supplies, while many have struggled to pass those costs on to customers.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with wider cost-of-living pressures and changing lifestyles, have also taken a toll.

Many landlords and industry bodies argue that without further support, more pubs could be at risk despite their important role as social and economic hubs within local communities.

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Accommodation transformation

A £7.5 million investment in the historic Tedsmore Hall estate near Oswestry has created a new accommodation base for businesses operating across Shropshire and the Welsh borders.

The latest phase of the Tedsmore Cottages development, delivered by the Robert Parker Collection Group, has transformed former stable blocks and added new mews-style cottages, alongside investment in landscaped grounds, solar energy and ground-source heat pump technology.

The site in West Felton is designed to offer a flexible alternative to traditional hotel accommodation, catering for visiting directors, clients, consultants, contractors and project teams working in the region for anything from a few nights to several weeks.

The estate is also seeking to support employees and their families relocating to the area, while providing a private setting for corporate away days, leadership retreats, strategy sessions and team-building events.

The latest expansion has increased capacity to 14 cottages with 54 bedrooms, accommodating up to 105 guests.

Robert Parker, chairman of the Robert Parker Collection Group, said: "Business visitors don't always want just another hotel room, particularly when they are working away for several days or weeks.

> The latest expansion has increased capacity to 14 cottages with 54 bedrooms, accommodating up to 105 guests

"Tedsmore Cottages gives people more space, comfort and flexibility, while creating opportunities for colleagues and project teams to spend valuable time together outside the working day.

"The estate also provides an ideal setting for leadership retreats, planning sessions and residential team events."

Much of the refurbishment and construction work was carried out by local firms, supporting skilled trades and businesses throughout the surrounding area.

Deal worth more than £32 million



The Epwin site at Hortonwood

A Telford warehouse and manufacturing facility has changed hands in a deal worth more than £32 million.

Birmingham-based MK2 Real Estate advised international real estate investment trust Corum XL on the sale to an undisclosed buyer.

The freehold properties cover nearly 20 acres at Hortonwood 37 and are let to Epwin Group, which makes windows, doors and fascia systems.

Mark Johnson, co-founder of MK2 and director in the firm's investment team, said: "Corum acquired this asset in 2019 in a sale and leaseback from Epwin, with MK2 advising Corum.

"It was great to re-engage with the Corum team and bring the asset to the market, attracting good interest and achieving the asking price."

Cushman & Wakefield advised the purchaser.

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New UK ‘gun hall’ opens in Telford

Defence Secretary Wes Streeting has officially opened a new ‘gun hall’ in Telford which will bring around 100 new manufacturing jobs to the town.

It is part of Rheinmetall’s wider investment of more than £200 million across its UK operations, strengthening Telford’s growing reputation as a key defence industry production hub.

Rheinmetall currently employs around 685 people at its Hadley Castle base, including 35 at the UK Gun Hall which will manufacture 120mm and 155mm weapon systems, including those supporting Challenger 3 and future artillery platforms.

At peak capacity, it has the ability to produce up to 245 barrels per year.

Rheinmetall transformed the previously empty facility at its large Telford base into an operational manufacturing site in just eight months, installing and commissioning advanced manufacturing equipment.

Armin Papperger, chief executive of Rheinmetall AG, joined Mr Streeting and representatives from Government, the Armed Forces and the business community for the official ribbon cutting.



Defence secretary Wes Streeting cuts the ribbon at the new Telford gun hall

He said: “This is an important milestone for Rheinmetall and for the United Kingdom. In a remarkably short period of time, we have turned our commitment into a sovereign manufacturing capability that will strengthen Britain’s defence industrial base for decades to come.

“The UK has been a long-standing and valued partner for Rheinmetall, and we are building on an already strong relationship. We are committed to investing in the UK for the long term, expanding our industrial footprint and working together to deliver the capabilities needed for the future.

“By combining Rheinmetall’s expertise with British skills, innovation and manufacturing, we are strengthening the UK’s sovereign industrial capacity, supporting the Armed Forces and contributing to the security of NATO and Europe.”

Rebecca Richards, managing director of Rheinmetall UK, added: “From the outset, we have listened to what the UK needs and focused on delivering sovereign capability at pace.

“By transferring specialist knowledge from Germany and developing a highly-skilled British workforce here in Telford, we are creating skilled jobs, supporting British businesses and building the industrial capacity needed to equip our Armed Forces while investing in the long-term prosperity of the UK.”



Five skills asks from a Shropshire business



Hollie Whittles



Hollie Whittles MBE attending the Maple Report parliamentary reception at the House of Lords

Every Budget has a skills agenda. It usually sounds good. It mentions apprenticeships, productivity and the jobs of the future, and then the detail lands weeks later in a way that makes sense if you employ 5,000 people and very little sense if you employ twenty.

A few weeks ago, I was at the Houses of Parliament to celebrate the launch of the Maple Review report; a Government backed review that I was on the board for, that looked into why economic hardship stops so many people starting and growing a business.

Its eight recommendations aren’t a skills document on the face of it, but half of them are about skills: business skills in schools, digital inclusion, financial confidence, long term mentoring. That report is a ready made shopping list.

1. Don’t let small firms be the ones who get rationed

Since August, apprenticeships for under 25s at non levy employers – which is almost every business in Shropshire – have been fully-funded by Government. That is a genuinely big deal and the single most useful thing the last Budget did for us. The catch is that after years of levy money going unspent, the Department for Education is now expected to overspend its apprenticeship budget for the first time.

My ask is simple: protect the non levy allocation. If apprentice starts have to be managed, don’t manage them by quietly closing the door on the firms the policy was designed to help.

2. Make apprenticeship units work for a business with no HR department

The new short course ‘units’ in AI, digital and engineering are, on paper, exactly what small employers have been asking for: targeted training without an 18 month commitment. In practice, most of the businesses I talk to in the county haven’t heard of them, and the ones who have can’t work out where to start.

Why not pay providers to do the paperwork, not to send it to us? And recognise supervision time, the hours a senior person spends with a trainee, as a real cost… because in a small business, it is.

3. Put AI skills money into the supply chain, not just the headline employers

The AI skills conversation in Whitehall still tends to happen at the scale of big employers and big programmes.

But Shropshire’s economy is a supply chain: the precision engineer feeding the automotive plant, the food producer feeding the retailer, the small consultancy feeding all of them.

If AI literacy only lands in the big names, the gap between them and everyone who supplies them widens, and the whole chain slows down.

What I’d want is modest and practical: funded AI and data literacy for existing staff in small firms, delivered locally, short enough that people can actually attend it, and tied to the industrial strategy sectors the Government says it cares about. Not a certificate for its own sake.

One of the Maple recommendations is to treat digital inclusion as economic infrastructure, the connectivity, the tools and the skills to use them, funded like roads rather than left to chance

I’d go further and say AI literacy now sits in that same category.

4. Stop moving the goalposts

Since the last Budget, levy paying employers have lost their 10% top up, seen the window to spend funds halved from 24 months to 12, and had their co-investment rate changed. Each of those decisions might be defensible on its own. Together they tell every employer the same thing: don’t plan too far ahead, because the rules will be different next year. Training is a multi-year decision.

Taking on a 16-year-old this September is a commitment to 2028 and beyond. So, my final ask is for a settlement that lasts, a funding framework employers can plan against for the life of a Parliament, not a Budget cycle.

5. Put business skills into every secondary school

The first Maple recommendation is the one I’d most like to see the Chancellor pick up: a national, public–private business skills guarantee for secondary schools, so that every young person meets real employers, real founders and understands the basics of running something before they leave education, starting in the most deprived areas and reaching every state secondary by 2030.

The schools, the colleges and plenty of willing employers are already here in Shropshire. What’s missing is the money and the mandate to make it universal rather than dependent on whether a particular head teacher happens to be keen. The Maple research found that confidence, not ideas, is what stops people from the least secure backgrounds taking the first step. You build that confidence at 14, not at 40.

Hollie Whittles MBE is co-founder & director of Purple Frog Data, in Telford

£5 million investment in construction skills future

A landmark £5 million investment will create exciting new opportunities for construction students across Shropshire through a new state-of-the-art Construction Skills Centre at Shrewsbury College's London Road Campus.



Stuart Raine, curriculum director of construction skills, and Chris Hesketh, curriculum manager of construction skills, with teaching staff and students



An artist's impression of the planned building

The new centre will give more young people the chance to develop the practical, industry-focused skills they need to build successful careers in construction, while studying at the Ofsted-outstanding college's London Road Campus. Work is due to begin this autumn, with the centre scheduled to welcome its first students in September 2027.

The new centre will give students more space to build knowledge and develop practical skills as they work towards industry-electrical and plumbing-related qualifications.

The new, purpose-designed training centre will include:

- Specialist facilities for electrical and plumbing training
- Eight new classrooms
- Four new workshops with specialist training bays for practical training and hands-on skills development

The new Construction Skills Centre will increase the college's capacity to equip students with the practical expertise needed for successful careers in some of the UK's most important industries and will help address skills shortages in the region's construction sector.

The new centre is being funded by the Department for Education's Construction Skills Capacity Funding together with a financial contribution from the college.

James Staniforth, principal of Shrewsbury College, said: "This is fantastic news for Shrewsbury College, our students and our local community.

"Securing this funding from the Department for Education is a tremendous achievement that reflects the college's standing and the strength of our vision for the future. The new Construction Skills Centre marks a major investment in Shropshire.

"This major development will significantly enhance our learning environment, expand opportunities for young people, and ensure we continue to meet the growing demand for places at Shrewsbury College and the evolving skills needs of employers across the region."

Joycelin Hoyland, chair of governors for the college, added: "This investment is part of Shrewsbury College's long-term strategy to strengthen its campuses, expand capacity to meet demand for places, and ensure students benefit from high-quality facilities that support their ambitions."

As construction gets under way, the college says it looks forward to sharing updates with students, staff, employers and the wider community as this landmark project progresses towards completion.

Careers set to take off with Airbus

Two Shrewsbury College students are preparing to take the next exciting step in their careers after being selected for the highly competitive Airbus Degree Apprenticeship Programme, which begins in September 2026.

Tom Hughes and Harrison Edgley have secured places at Airbus, one of the world's leading aerospace companies, after a rigorous application and selection process that attracts thousands of applicants from across the UK each year.

The former Corbet School students are close friends and had applied separately to the Airbus Apprenticeship scheme, unaware of each other's applications. There was also a degree of good-natured competition between them throughout the assessment process, especially when Harrison learned slightly earlier than Tom that he had been accepted onto the apprenticeship scheme.

The duo plan to stay in the local area and share the daily commute to the Airbus facility in Broughton, near Chester.

James Staniforth said: "This is a fantastic achievement and a recognition of their talent, determination and hard work.

"Degree apprenticeships offer an outstanding opportunity for young people to gain valuable industry experience while continuing their education. Airbus is one of the most respected employers in the world. We wish them every success as they begin this exciting new chapter."



Tom Hughes and Harrison Edgley at the London Road campus

A celebration of neurodiversity

Writers, innovators and business pioneers were among the winners at this year's Dyslexia Awards, held at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel.



Agricultural technology leader Tullis Matson from Whitchurch was named as the winner of the STEMM category



Sally Joyner from In the Loop presents Jane Pickworth with her Amazing Artist Award – photo by Nate Lansdell

The competition, which shines a light on the incredible achievements of dyslexic individuals across the UK, was launched ten years ago by Shropshire businesswoman Elizabeth Wikinson MBE.

Among the local winners at this year's ceremony were Shrewsbury's Jane Pickworth – an artist, puppeteer and voice actor who works in TV, theatre and children's entertainment.

Jane who picked up the Amazing Artist Award said: "There's no words to explain how incredibly emotional and happy I am feeling. I was only diagnosed last year and it is an honour to be recognised."

Agricultural technology leader Tullis Matson, who runs Whitchurch-based Stallion AI, won the STEMM category for achievement in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine.

He said: "Dyslexia has played such a significant role throughout my life, shaping the way I think, the challenges I've overcome and, most importantly, the opportunities it has brought me.

"To receive this recognition is incredibly special and reinforces something I've always believed: dyslexia isn't a disadvantage, it's a superpower that can open doors to extraordinary things."

Elizabeth Wilkinson said: "It has been an absolute pleasure to see so many talented dyslexic individuals celebrated. Our awards ceremonies are always a special event for us to get together, meet with incredible people and mark amazing achievements."

Bespoke Computing from Telford is a long-time supporter of the awards and this year sponsored two award categories – the Community Shining Star and Role Model categories.

Managing director Chris Pallett said: "We work in an industry where there are a lot of neurodivergent people, and anything that helps to raise awareness of the issues is positive for society, and for our industry."



Place management leader is won over by Wellington

The boss of an international place management organisation has praised Wellington for 'doing things right' after spending a fact-finding day in the town.

Ian Harvey, head of the Institute of Place Management, explored regeneration work at the town's market, met several expanding businesses, and took part in debates with a wide range of local stakeholders.

The Institute supports individuals and organisations to create thriving places, connecting research, policy and practice and feeding its findings and views into the top level of Government.

"The only way you really understand what is happening in a place is by paying a visit, meeting the shop owners, the business owners, and the people who are trying to co-ordinate activities," Ian said.

"I take the opportunity on these visits to listen to what businesses are saying, and aggregate it across the country. It means that when I go into Government-level conversations, I can confidently tell ministers whether their opinions ring true with what the people are saying.



Ian Harvey (right) with delegates on a visit to Wellington Market

> The partnership and collaboration that every town needs is quite clearly happening here



Sally Themans (left) led the group on a tour of Wellington town centre to meet businesses

"I have absolutely loved going round Wellington and hearing from some brilliant small businesses about some of their journeys, and the support they have received.

"There is no one-size-fits-all solution to place, which is what makes it so fascinating, but there are certain conditions you do need for success. I'll be feeding much of what I have discovered here in Wellington back to central Government."

He said it was vital for a successful town to have a vision, a group of local people to drive it forward, and the backing of councils, businesses and the wider community to maximise potential.

"What will I take away? I will be telling people Wellington is a place that is doing things right… and that other locations might want to check it out.

"The partnership and collaboration that every town needs is quite clearly happening here. If you could copy the passion and entrepreneurial spirit of the businesses I have spoken to and drop them into other places, they would undoubtedly be positive."

Ian visited several Wellington businesses including Little Green Pantry, Spinning Around records, Music Vault, and Boardroom Gaming Café, followed by a tour of Wellington Orbit which hosted the afternoon panel discussion.

Among the delegates on the visit were Clive Fletcher (high streets and a real community pride and spirit. The Government is saying all the right things about place at the moment, but at the same time indicating that funding is going to be centred very much on urban mayoral areas. That's great if you are in cities like Birmingham or Manchester, but we are a rural community of smaller market towns, and our funding has dried up.

"It's not all about money of course, but it does make a big difference. I hope this is one of the messages that Ian has taken away. When people feel part of their community, invested in their community, and proud of their community, things really do happen."

Ian Harvey was appointed head of the Institute of Place Management in October 2024. He is also the co-founder and vice-president of the national charity Civic Voice and serves as a judge for the Visa Let's Celebrate Towns award.

He is a member of the Historic Places Panel for Historic England and was appointed a Place Fellow by the University of Birmingham in early 2025. Ian was elected a Senior Fellow of the Institute of Place Management in 2021, having championed the voices and efforts of thousands of placemakers across the UK.



Ian Harvey (left) with delegates on the visit to Wellington



The visit included a tour of local businesses and development projects in Wellington town centre



Entering Wellington Market to look at the renovation work



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The site was originally established as a working farm museum



The 123-acre site has built a strong reputation as a leading family day out

Visitor attraction is for sale

One of Shropshire's biggest visitor attractions is on the market, with an asking price of £1 million.

Specialist business property adviser Christie & Co has been instructed to market Park Hall Farm Countryside Experience – a multi-award-winning family visitor attraction near Oswestry.

The 123-acre site has built a strong reputation as one of the region's leading family destinations, attracting over 64,000 visitors annually.

Originally established as a working farm museum and subsequently developed into a purpose-built visitor experience, Park Hall Farm offers an exceptional turnkey opportunity for operators, investors, leisure groups, educational providers or family attraction businesses seeking a proven, profitable operation with substantial future growth potential.

Park Hall Farm's appeal is underpinned by an extensive and diverse range of attractions, including four museums, indoor and outdoor play facilities, animal encounters, adventure activities, educational experiences and the unique World War I Trenches Experience.

The attraction's position close to the England-Wales border, provides access to multiple catchments across Shropshire, Cheshire, North Wales and the wider Midlands. The business benefits from loyal customers with over 2,000 annual memberships as well as a strong schools market, welcoming 4,822 educational visitors in the latest reported period.

With long leasehold tenure arrangements extending until 2097, there are significant opportunities to expand events, food and beverage sales, retail offering and visitor numbers. The site also includes a three-bedroom cottage available from October 2026, suitable for owner occupation, staff accommodation or rental income.



Richard Powell and Martyn Hughes had the vision to transform the site

Tom Glanvill, director of Retail & Leisure at Christie & Co, who is managing the sale process, said: "Park Hall Farm represents one of the most compelling visitor attraction opportunities to come to the market in recent years. The business combines scale, profitability, strong visitor numbers and an exceptionally diverse offering, all within a highly accessible location serving both England and Wales.

"With a loyal customer base, multiple income streams, extensive infrastructure already in place and clear opportunities for further growth, it offers purchasers a rare chance to acquire a genuine destination attraction with significant future potential. We anticipate strong interest from both existing operators looking to expand and new investors seeking entry into the thriving family leisure and attractions sector."

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The foundation of a secure digital future

Whitchurch-based enterprise networking specialist EDNX has been acquired by Irish-headquartered Viatel Technology Group for an undisclosed sum.

EDNX was founded in 2017 and is based at Park View Business Centre on the north Shropshire border.

The company has developed from a specialist consultancy into a Cisco Premier Partner that designs, implements and supports network infrastructure for organisations including NHS trusts and major pharmaceutical businesses.

Its team works across enterprise and campus networks, wireless infrastructure, secure IoT, SD-WAN and SD-Access. These systems support day-to-day operations in healthcare, pharmaceuticals, life sciences and manufacturing, where network reliability, security and performance are critical.

The acquisition adds EDNX's networking expertise to Viatel's existing connectivity, cyber security, cloud and managed services capabilities. It follows Viatel's purchase of Scottish cyber security specialist FullProxy in July and gives EDNX access to a wider customer and service base across Ireland and the UK.

David Ratcliffe, chief executive of EDNX, said: "Over many years, we have built EDNX around deep technical expertise and a commitment to delivering network infrastructure that supports critical outcomes.

"Joining Viatel gives our customers access to broader capabilities while preserving the technical excellence and customer focus that have defined EDNX.

"We see strong alignment in our cultures, ambitions and long-term commitment to customer success.

"The combination also creates exciting opportunities to bring our specialist enterprise networking, infrastructure, secure IoT, campus network and Cisco capabilities to organisations across Ireland while supporting continued growth throughout the UK market."



EDNX co-founder Wojtek Siodelski, Paul Rellis, David Ratcliffe, and Viatel managing director Damien McCann

Paul Rellis, chief executive of Viatel Technology Group, said: "Reliable networks are the foundation of secure digital services. As organisations adopt AI and move more data between sites, systems and cloud platforms, network performance, visibility and resilience become even more important.

"EDNX brings specialist enterprise networking expertise and a strong record in demanding environments. Its capabilities complement our existing connectivity, cyber security and managed services portfolio, giving customers access to a broader set of skills through one group."

Eoghan Browne from A&L Goodbody and Gareth Cosgrove from Grant Thornton acted as advisors to Viatel on the acquisition.

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A regional award for recruitment specialist

Shrewsbury-based Blue Orchid Recruitment is celebrating after winning a regional award.

It was named recruitment agency of the year at the West Midlands My Local Awards – a competition based on votes from customers.

Judges said: “The agency is known for rigorous candidate vetting, responsive communication and building long-term relationships with local employers.”

A delighted founder Rob Griffiths said: “I want to say a huge thank you to everyone who took the time to vote for us and to everyone who continues to support the business.

“As an independent business, every recommendation, referral, kind word and vote genuinely means a lot. Running a business isn’t always easy, so to know that people believe in what we’re doing and have taken the time to show their support is incredibly special.”

Blue Orchid Recruitment specialises in recruitment across legal, finance, accountancy, marketing and property.



Rob Griffiths of Blue Orchid Recruitment

County link to Amazon

A unique control system developed by a Shropshire engineering firm to monitor climate change has been switched on in the Amazon rainforest.

Engineers working for Transicon – an automation and control specialist – completed the final stages of the project for Birmingham Institute of Forest Research remotely from the company’s Telford headquarters.

The sophisticated industrial control system is designed to manage a network of ‘arrays’ – a cluster of experimental equipment including valves, gas analysers, wind sensors and other instruments used to study the impact of rising CO2 levels on mature trees.

Data extracted from the experiment site is shared globally to help build the models that inform international climate policy. Its success in the UK led to the control system being deployed to upgrade a site north of Manaus, Brazil.

Engineers from Transicon and BiFOR travelled to the Amazon to help install the equipment, connecting a rainforest site thousands of miles away to a control room in Telford.

Jennifer Hughes, general manager at Transicon, said: "Our original solution was designed and developed to provide a blueprint for reliable, consistent experimental control systems so the fact it has now been implemented across the other side of the world to support vital research in the Amazon rainforest is absolutely fantastic.”



Meeting the neighbours

Seymour Manufacturing International opened the doors of its headquarters to host the latest ‘Meet the Neighbours’ event organised by Shropshire Chamber of Commerce. It was a chance for the Telford-based company to showcase its thermal insulation product range in an informal setting, and network with a broad range of other local employers.



'Rooms of energy' spark creativity

Shropshire-based watercolour artist and entrepreneur Meg Hawkins has been crowned Best Creative Business at the Enterprise Vision Awards, marking another exciting milestone for the independent family business she started from her kitchen table in 2014.

The award rounded off an inspiring couple of days in Blackpool, beginning with the SheChain event at the Winter Gardens, where Meg and her daughter Coral spent the day surrounded by entrepreneurs, business leaders and speakers sharing their experiences of building and growing businesses.

“The whole couple of days were about being surrounded by people who understand what it takes to build something of your own,” said Meg, who has a studio at Burwarton.

“Life and business don’t always smell of roses, and sometimes you need to put yourself in a room full of people with that energy. I went to the EVAS wanting to be inspired. I genuinely didn’t expect to win.”

Meg started her business in 2014 with original watercolour paintings, initially turning them into cards and prints. Today, her artwork sits at the heart of the Meg Hawkins Home & Lifestyle brand, with products and designs reaching customers across the UK and internationally.

But for Meg, the award belongs to more than one person. “I’m the artist, but they’re my team. My husband Ade and our daughter Coral are a huge part of the business, alongside our wider team and family.

“One thing that really stood out over those two days was that behind every entrepreneur there are people supporting them, encouraging them and reminding them that they’ve got this.

“Being creative is one thing. Turning that creativity into a sustainable business is another challenge altogether. If winning this encourages another artist or small business owner to keep going, then that means a lot.”



Another award for Shropshire artist Meg Hawkins

Changes to Employment Legislation

HATCHERS
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A number of important Employment Law changes have come into force in October 2026, with more due to follow in early 2027. Some of the main changes have been outlined below:

Employment Tribunal Time Limits

From 1st October 2026 the time limit for an employee to bring a claim in an Employment Tribunal has increased from 3 to 6 months.

Unfair Dismissal Protection

From 1st January 2027, employees will no longer require 2 years to bring an unfair dismissal claim. Instead, a 6-month qualifying period will apply. In addition, the current compensatory award cap will be removed meaning that unfair dismissal claims could be even more costly to employers.

Trade Union Reforms

Independent trade unions will have a new legal right to access workplaces and engage with workers, either in person or virtually. From January 2027, employers will be under a new duty to inform employees of their right to join a trade union.

ACAS

ACAS have launched a consultation on updating its code of practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures, as formal disciplinaries are estimated to cost employers £2 billion a year.

To discuss any Employment Law queries, call 01743 248545, or email mail@hatchers.co.uk.



Amelia Mulcahy
Solicitor







Anton Gunter took part (again) in the Titan Desert Almeria – a four-day bike stage race under UCI rules with a competitive elite field of cyclists

What I learnt this summer

Anton Gunter



This summer was a scorcher and reminded me a lot of growing up in the motherland, South Africa. Nice hot days, followed by longer warm evenings.

This year was slightly different as I prepared to once again take on Titan Desert Almeria, a four-day bike stage race under UCI rules with a very competitive elite field. I had previously done this in 2024 but took it rather lightly, with little regard for how severe racing in Europe's only desert would be. Having not prepared properly last time, this time was different.

> There's 7,600 feet of climbing over a distance of 62 miles. When it came to it, it turned out I wasn't quite ready

People thought I was crazy, riding day in and day out in the hot weather of our summer, making sure all my preparation with regards to my body lined up to race in the warmth of the Tabernas Desert.

Four days of intense racing spread over nearly 200 miles of sandy tracks, mountain singletrack and the occasional jeep track. A mere 22,000 feet of climbing would provide the ultimate test as to how my training had been and whether my body was ready.

Day 1 was a solid five-hour, 30-minute ride, which went a long way to proving I was ready and, by the time I was sipping a beer on Day 2, I was already four hours faster than previously. I was over the moon and was looking forward to the queen stage. It's called this because it's one b**** of a day. There's 7,600 feet of climbing over a distance of 62 miles. When it came to it, it turned out I wasn't quite ready. Racing hard the first few days meant lactic acid had built up in my legs and suddenly a five-and-a-half-hour day turned into seven hours.

You see, in these sorts of races, a lapse of concentration can not only mean a fall or an injury as you speed downhill at nearly 40mph, but a lapse of directional concentration can mean getting lost. And in the race director's eyes, this is a clear violation of "not respecting the track". Bosh, and then an additional three-hour penalty followed, which meant my target of being within the first 100 riders in a field of 600 was over. Suddenly I was nearly last in my age group and all the preparation felt like it was for nothing. No amount of talking, pleading or even begging would allow those pesky 180 minutes to be scrapped.

The last day is a procession, with a mere 40 miles of riding and only 2,200ft of climbing. It was only on the final day that I realised I had prepared properly. My body was ready for this race; it was my own concentration that let me down. In fact, when I looked at where I had got lost, I was in a group of six or seven riders who simply started to enjoy a glorious downhill section and we missed the turning.

BUT…what I learnt this summer whilst riding my bike was that no matter how well you prepare, no matter how well you train and how ready you are to race, things happen which mean you may not reach your desired result.

Did I still enjoy the race? Yes! Was I disappointed? Initially, yes, but on the last day it dawned on me that maybe this was not all about the final result. For me, it became about the laughs and the smiles my rubbish Spanish had generated. It was the conversations we had when climbing some very big hills and, finally, it was about improvement from 2024. That was most definitely achieved.

Which leads me on to how we prepare in business. Someone once said: "Failure to prepare is preparing to fail." Whilst this may be true in some circles, it's not actually something to worry about. We all care about our businesses and make every effort to be ready for what is thrown in front of us. Sometimes it's not a lack of hard work, knowledge or the will to try; it's just that things happen.

> I know 2027 will be another bumper training year and, yes, I will be back for more of the desert, because I simply don't give up

In freight forwarding, we have had Brexit, Covid, a downturn in the economy, the invasion of Ukraine and the attack on Israel. The continued Suez Canal debacle and so many other worldwide issues mean that, no matter how hard you work and no matter how hard you prepare, things simply don't go right.

We didn't ask for those things to have an effect and, whilst we prepare to negate them, sometimes we need to simply hold our hands up, pat ourselves on the back, say well done and simply go again.

I know 2027 will be another bumper training year and, yes, I will be back for more of the desert, because I simply don't give up trying.

So if 2026 has not been an overly impressive year for business, let's all reset, let's all knuckle down and start the climb to having an amazing 2027.

Anton Gunter is managing director of Global Freight Services, the international freight forwarder with its headquarters in Telford

Lights… camera… investment opportunity

A new festive film is due to begin shooting in Shrewsbury in the new year with a series of familiar names included in the cast.

But the team behind First Christmas say they are still in need of more business investment if the project is to get off the ground.

Producers Keith Kopp, Luke Allen and Alyssa Roehrenbeck have been scouting locations in Shrewsbury for several months, and held an event at The Loopy Shrew to tell investors and businesses about their ideas.

First Christmas is described as a dark comedy drama centred on a widowed father who gathers his estranged adult children and their families for Christmas, hoping laughter, nostalgia, and a few festive disasters might be enough to heal old wounds.

Among the star names already attached to the project are The Full Monty and Game of Thrones actor Mark Addy, Poldark's Eleanor Tomlinson, Ace Ventura's Ian McNeice, Samuel Anderson of Amandaland, and Sarita Choudhary, who appeared in Sex And The City spin-off And Just Like That…

Rather than following the conventional route of waiting until financing is fully-secured before assembling the cast, the producers brought them together for a table reading in front of an audience at Covent Garden in London.

They said the audience response proved the screenplay had a real universal appeal.

Luke Allen, from Wrockwardine Wood in Telford, has teamed up with American-based duo Keith and Alyssa – who say they have fallen in love with the English charm of Shrewsbury and its huge potential.



Cast and crew members at the Covent Garden reading – picture courtesy of James Loxley



The informal event at The Loopy Shrew

"There's no shortage of good independent films trying to get made, but the challenge is finding ways to stand out and giving the right partners the confidence to come on board," Luke said.

"We felt that bringing the cast together and allowing people to experience the script in this way, rather than simply read about it, was a much better way to demonstrate what we're building. We are asking people to invest in our creative vision, so there's something very powerful about actually showing it to them in this way."

The informal event at The Loopy Shrew was a chance to introduce the project to the Shropshire business and cultural communities,

"We want people in Shrewsbury to feel part of this – like they did with A Christmas Carol all those years ago, which people still remember so fondly," Luke said.

A significant amount of development capital for the movie, which has a budget of just under £3 million, has already been raised. But there are more opportunities for other businesses to invest through sponsorship, set visits, or even product placements.

Anyone interested can contact luke@askseekknock.co.uk. To keep up with the project as it develops, follow @firstchristmasfilm or connect with the production company askseekknock.co.uk

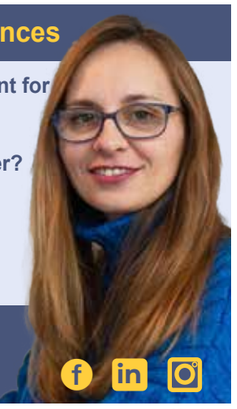


On location in Shrewsbury, from left, producers Luke Allen, Keith Kopp and Alyssa Roehrenbeck

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Belinda Swinnerton from Rightmove



Networking at the Halls Commercial event



James Evans delivering an update on local commercial property activity



Carl Jones hosting a panel debate and Q&A with the speakers

Evening focused on yield, stability and opportunity

The current commercial property market, the wider economic outlook and factors influencing investment decisions were all in the spotlight at a successful event organised in Shrewsbury.

Commercial property investors and professionals, landlords and business owners from across Shropshire and surrounding counties attended an evening organised by Halls Commercial at the company's Battlefield headquarters.

Speakers at the event – themed 'The Commercial Property Advantage 2026: Yield, Stability & Opportunity' – were Luke Mayberry from Barclays Private Bank, Aulfat Bi from accountants Azets UK, Belinda Swinnerton from Rightmove, and James Evans, head of Halls Commercial.

Luke discussed the current economic and financial environment and its implications for commercial property.

He said financing conditions remained challenging, with borrowing costs continuing to influence property investment decisions and gilt yields likely to come under pressure in the coming weeks.

Despite long-term borrowing costs remaining high, creating continued challenges for property investors, he explained how the Government's broader growth agenda appeared to support the property market.

House building remains a key Government priority and infrastructure and regional investment are expected to increase. Devolution could create opportunities for local development, potentially supporting investment across regional property markets, he added.

While there is uncertainty about Capital Gains Tax, dividend tax, inheritance tax and property-related changes, he said higher taxes on wealthier individuals are considered likely.

Aulfat focused on capital allowances and maximising tax relief on commercial property. She highlighted the types of property and expenditure that can qualify for allowances, the importance of understanding when claims can be made, and strategies for maximising the tax relief available to property owners and investors.



Speakers (from left) Luke Mayberry from Barclays Private Bank, James Evans (head of Halls Commercial), Belinda Swinnerton from Rightmove, and Aulfat Bi from accountants Azets UK

She stressed the importance of considering capital allowances as part of wider commercial property investment and acquisition decisions and advised how investors and property owners can avoid overlooking potentially valuable tax relief.

Belinda, who is based in Market Drayton, spoke about the latest commercial property market data and trends, sharing insight from Rightmove's latest market research and Q2 Commercial Insights. She reviewed current market activity, demand and trends across the commercial property sector, providing a data-led perspective on the opportunities and challenges facing the market.

James Evans provided a local, regional and national commercial property perspective, discussing the current market across Shropshire and the wider region, sharing insight of sectors including drive-thru outlets, retail, investments, developments, land and opportunities, particularly for investments in the commercial market.

The speakers took part in an interactive question and answer session with the audience, chaired by Carl Jones (editor of Shropshire Business Magazine), before networking with commercial property investors, landlords, business owners and sector professionals.



Luke Mayberry from Barclays Private Bank addresses the audience



Aulfat Bi from accountants Azets UK speaking about capital allowances and maximising tax relief on commercial property

Jenny's Catering provided a selection of canapés and Rowton Vineyard supplied wines for the event.

"The Commercial Property Advantage is about bringing together the expertise and insight that our clients and contacts need to navigate what remains a complex commercial property market," said James.

"We heard valuable perspectives from Luke, Aulfat and Belinda, covering everything from financing conditions and the wider economic outlook to capital allowances and the latest market data. These issues influence directly the decisions being made by property owners and investors.

"While there are clearly challenges around borrowing costs, taxation and economic uncertainty, there are also opportunities, particularly through regional investment, infrastructure and development.

"We were delighted with the response to the event and thank the speakers, guests and event partners for helping us create such an engaging evening.

"For us, the benefit of putting this event on is the interaction with our client base. Hopefully we're attracting more clients while giving an overview of the commercial property sector, with professional advice from various other professionals.

"One thread that lots of the speakers kept coming back to is how differently the sectors in the commercial market are faring at the moment. My job is to identify where the successful sectors are going to be, and drive-thru outlets seem to be very much the opportunity right now.

"There are occupiers out there who want to take space; it's a good opportunity for investors, and capital expenditure for developers is less – you're de-risking it. So it's a very positive story, there's no doubt about that.

"And the demand for these drive-thru outlets just seems insatiable. We've just got consent from Telford and Wrekin Council at Madeley for a Costa – that's coming. We've just put three up at Whittington Road in Oswestry, and we've got the Costa at the Sentinel Works in Shrewsbury.

"We're starting to see new names seeking representation like Wendy's, Popeyes, and people like that jumping on the bandwagon, giving Costa, KFC, and Starbucks a real run for their money.

"But a lot of these tend to be out-of-town or edge-of-town developments, and it's a bit patchy for our market towns in Shropshire. Some towns are finding it more difficult than others.

"As I said in my presentation, retail is on an evolution – it's certainly not dead; it's probably a rebirth.

"Every town centre is going to have to adapt, and some are behind the curve while some are ahead of it. Shrewsbury looks good at the moment; Ludlow looks less good for a town of that quality. Clearly we're seeing a rationalisation of many town centres and a contraction in some cases as other users come into play."

Where demand was currently outstripping supply, James said, was for small industrial units with additional yard space for an owner occupier.

"Secondary developments are also holding their value, because it's so expensive to build new now. Secondary stock continues to see good value attached to it, driven by the fact that redevelopment is a tough ask – and until construction costs come down, I can see that continuing."

You can hear more of James Evans' comments, as well as an interview with the team from Rowton Vineyard, on the Shropshire Business Podcast. Tune into all the episodes on shropshirebiz.com



From left, Bernie Jones, Kal Wood, Andrew Foskett, Harlech Foodservice account manager Debbie Nicholls, Sue Foskett, Ellie Wood, Libby Biddulph, Susie Thomas and Laura Foskett

Take a seat at wharf-side café

A family-run food firm has helped breathe new life into a historic canal wharf by donating three new benches to its café.

Harlech Foodservice gifted the recycled plastic seats to the Welldeck Café at Wappenshall Wharf near Telford – a major restoration project by Shrewsbury & Newport Canals Trust.

The donation has strengthened Harlech's family links with the café where sisters Susie Thomas and Libby Biddulph work as volunteers.

The company, which has a base in Telford, is run by their niece Laura Foskett and nephews Andrew and Jonathan Foskett.

Andrew said: "It is just wonderful to be able to invest in the locality in such a great cause and such a fantastic restoration project."

Support for businesses

Novuna Business Cash Flow from Telford has expanded into asset-based lending with the launch of a new £2 million to £25 million funding proposition, significantly extending its ability to support larger and more complex UK businesses.

The new facility enables businesses to raise funding against receivables, inventory, plant and machinery and commercial property through a single integrated funding arrangement.

Novuna says it gives them greater capability to support mid-sized and larger businesses with acquisitions, investment, restructuring and growth.

All facilities will include invoice finance as part of the overall funding structure, with individual facilities ranging from £2 million to £25 million.

Supporting the launch is the appointment of Neil Sturgeon as corporate business development manager, bringing more than 40 years' experience across asset-based lending, receivables finance and working capital.

Neil has held senior business development and origination positions with two major banks, working with mid-sized and larger corporates across a wide range of sectors.

> Novuna says it gives them greater capability to support mid-sized and larger businesses with acquisitions

He will work alongside Dan Lambourne, head of relationship management and corporate, to grow Novuna Business Cash Flow's presence in the corporate funding market and develop relationships with corporate finance advisers, debt advisers and professional introducers across the UK.

National accolade for animal welfare specialist

A Harper Adams University graduate has been named Farm Advisor of the Year at the 2026 British Farming Awards.

Chloe Rodriguez – an animal welfare specialist at the livestock housing and ventilation company Galebreaker – received the national accolade in recognition of her work helping farmers improve animal health, welfare and productivity. Her work primarily focuses on dairy cows and young stock, assessing environmental factors and recommending improvements that can help reduce disease risks and improve livestock comfort.

Chloe said: "I'm very grateful to the team at Galebreaker for the opportunities and support they've given me.

"I've learnt so much from getting out on farms and seeing first-hand the difference that good advice can make."

Andrew Gardner, technical director at Galebreaker, said: "Chloe has been a real powerhouse in developing our animal welfare team and shaping the services we offer farmers, combining technical knowledge with a genuine passion for improving livestock health and welfare."



Chloe Rodriguez receives her Farm Advisor of the Year Award from comedian John Culshaw and Olivia Skeoch on behalf of Agri-Works

A decade of impact

The chief executive of a Shropshire charity has been recognised for her impact as she marks a decade at the helm.

Lingen Davies Cancer Support has been transformed under the leadership of Naomi Atkin, who joined the cancer support charity in 2016.

Over that time, annual charitable income has quadrupled to £1.7 million with another record-breaking year announced at the latest annual meeting.

Lingen Davies delivers services and support for those impacted by cancer across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, and Mid Wales before, during and after cancer.

It is currently partnering with Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital Trust to fundraise for the £5 million Sunflower Appeal to establish a second cancer centre in the county – at the Princess Royal Hospital.

Naomi said: "I am enormously proud to lead this dedicated team of professionals all striving to make a positive difference to lives impacted by cancer locally.

"We have expanded our team, developed new services, created new partnerships, significantly increased our fundraising capacity, and are much more proactive about identifying where we can make the greatest difference.

"Everything we have achieved has been made possible by an exceptional staff team, our Trustees, volunteers, fundraisers, businesses, healthcare partners and the extraordinary generosity of communities across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and Mid Wales."

She added: "There is still an enormous amount to do, and that is what makes the future so exciting."

> I am enormously proud to lead this dedicated team of professionals all striving to make a positive difference to lives impacted by cancer locally

Tim Cooper, chair of trustees for Lingen Davies, said: "Naomi has led Lingen Davies from a small charity to the primary cancer charity in our region with a huge ambition.

"Each year we achieve more in our offer to people living with and beyond cancer, each year we raise more funds to make it happen, and each year the charity grows stronger and our offer more diverse.

"The Board are incredibly proud of Naomi's achievements and the difference she has made both to us as a charity and to the lives of local people with cancer."



Naomi Atkin





New home for Catherine's Bakery – a former derelict bank in Bridgnorth



Renovating a long-vacant property in Oswestry

Listening to our High Streets



Matt Potts

As town centres prepare for Christmas, shop windows brighten, cafés, restaurants, pubs and bars welcome seasonal visitors, markets become busier and local events bring people together. It is also a moment to reflect on the role our high streets play and what they need to thrive in future.

Whenever high streets are discussed nationally, the conversation often focuses on decline. Vacant units, online retail and changing consumer habits dominate the headlines. But this rarely reflects the more complex picture we see when speaking to businesses across Shropshire.

Our market towns attract investment, entrepreneurs and visitors. New businesses are opening, historic buildings are finding new uses, and local partnerships are creating valuable new opportunities. But challenges remain. Rising operating costs, concerns about footfall, recruitment pressures and squeezed margins continue to challenge all our high street businesses.

That is why listening is one of the most important parts of our role.

High street businesses raise issues including business rates, staffing costs, energy bills, parking, security and access to funding. They want practical support to improve profitability, attract customers and use digital channels effectively. There are no simple answers, but these conversations shape the support we provide and the partnerships we build.

Successful town centres are not created by imposing solutions from outside. They are built by listening to businesses, understanding local challenges and working together to address them. This collaborative approach matters because high streets now perform a different role from twenty years ago. People still shop in town centres, but they also visit to work, socialise, access services, attend events and enjoy something distinctive.

Successful high streets have adapted to this change. Shops, cafés, restaurants, pubs and bars sit alongside culture, services and community activity, supporting both the daytime and evening economy and creating a sense of 'place' that we are keen to support and nourish.

Across Shropshire, targeted investment has supported this transition. In Shrewsbury, through supporting the Shrewsbury BID's 'Work in Shrewsbury' programme, UKSPF funding helped local high street businesses access grants, training and expert support.

Elsewhere UKSPF has helped bring vacant properties back into use. In Bridgnorth, support transformed a former derelict bank into a thriving bakery and community hub, creating a destination business while restoring a prominent town centre building. In Oswestry, funding refurbished a long-vacant property, generating new commercial activity and improving the town centre.

These projects are not simply about buildings. They are about confidence. When an empty property becomes occupied, it signals that a town is investing in its future.

Relatively small investments can also make a meaningful difference. In Ludlow, grant support enabled a 24-hour prescription collection service, helping a long-established high street business respond to changing customer expectations while continuing to provide an important local service.

And alongside investment, partnership working remains essential.

We continue to work closely with Shrewsbury BID, Oswestry BID, Visit Shropshire, town councils and local businesses because they understand their places better than anyone. Through the Market Towns Collective, partners from across Shropshire meet regularly to share ideas, tackle common challenges and learn from one another.

The Shropshire Growth Hub also regularly visits market towns offering free business advice and support.

Our market towns shape perceptions of Shropshire. They support local employment, attract visitors and contribute to the quality of life that makes the county an attractive place to live and invest, which has been recognised in national polls over recent years. It is no coincidence that towns such as Shrewsbury continue to receive recognition for their independent shops, hospitality businesses, markets and vibrant town centre offer.

Consumer behaviour will continue to evolve, and businesses will need to adapt. The most successful market towns will build on their own unique strengths. Our role is to help create the conditions for businesses to succeed and attract investment and funding to keep our high streets welcoming, useful and distinctive.

As we look towards a new year, we remain committed to working alongside businesses and partners across Shropshire. Strong high streets are not only good for business. They are fundamental to the prosperity and vitality of our communities.

Matt Potts is service manager for economy, funding and skills at Invest in Shropshire

Making sense of AI

A Shrewsbury-based entrepreneur and former defence scientist has launched a new business service to help companies make sense of artificial intelligence and automation.



Jack Ryan has officially launched Sygneus AI

Jack Ryan, winner of the Young Business Person of the Year award at this year's Shropshire Chamber Business Awards, has officially launched Sygneus AI.

It is an extension of his established consultancy Sygneus, which specialises in helping scientists, engineers and deep-tech companies commercialise innovations and grow their businesses, particularly in highly regulated and high-trust sectors such as defence, nuclear and security.

Jack said: "Every week, there's a new AI model, a new piece of software, another ChatGPT or Claude update, or some revolutionary new feature that's supposedly going to transform how we work.

"For a busy business owner who's already juggling customers, staff, finances and day-to-day operations, keeping up with it all is practically a full-time job. The challenge isn't necessarily accessing AI anymore. It's understanding which tools are actually worth investing in, how they fit into your business, and whether they're going to deliver a meaningful return on investment.

"Too many businesses are buying software or experimenting with AI without first considering the problems they're trying to solve. We want to change that."

A chartered engineer, with postgraduate qualifications in machine intelligence and a career spanning advanced robotics, software and defence technology, Jack believes the key is making sophisticated technology accessible and commercially useful.

Having previously worked on emerging technologies for the UK Government, he is familiar with translating complex engineering into practical applications.

Jack said: "People sometimes talk about AI as though it's rocket science. Well, I used to work in rocket science, and I can assure you it doesn't need to be that complicated!"

Sygneus AI has also become an official Zoho Partner, specialising in customer relationship management, business management systems and process automation.

It is also working with the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce to deliver practical training for local businesses and will be staging a workshop titled "Take the Stress Out of AI & Automation: Practical Tools to Give You Your Time Back" in the new year.





Key findings from the report



The impact of AI

Why we're rethinking work, wealth and security matters

By Adam Pringle

Confidence in traditional corporate careers is fading as a growing number of us question whether employment delivers the security and prosperity it once promised.

That's the eye-catching conclusion of the new Business Ownership Index, which suggests we are undergoing a fundamental shift in our attitudes towards work.

Almost two-thirds of adults now believe traditional careers are less secure than they used to be, and only one in five of us expect to follow a traditional career path with a single employer.

Growing numbers of us are looking beyond traditional employment, according to the research, viewing business ownership as a route to greater control, financial resilience and long-term security.

Three-quarters of adults are unhappy that wage growth has failed to keep pace with inflation, while more than half believe working for someone else limits their earning potential.

In contrast, 54% believe owning a business is now the best way to maximise earnings, rising to 65% among 18 to 24-year-olds and 60% among 25 to 34-year-olds. It suggests that, although running a business brings its own challenges and risks, increasing numbers of people are deciding that the rewards of being their own boss outweigh the comforts of a traditional nine-to-five role.

> Our research suggests more people are questioning whether an employer alone can provide long-term financial security

Andrew Markou, chief executive and co-founder of BusinessesForSale.com which compiled the index, said: "We're living through a period of profound change.

"Artificial intelligence, rising living costs, wage growth failing to keep pace with inflation, and greater economic uncertainty are all causing people to question whether traditional employment can still deliver the financial security it once promised.

"We've spent years talking about side hustles and earning extra income. But our research suggests more people are questioning whether an employer alone can provide long-term financial security and are increasingly looking to business ownership to build their own future.

"Britain hasn't lost its appetite for work or success. What we're seeing is a growing entrepreneurial spirit, with more people determined to create their own opportunities rather than rely entirely on someone else's business.

"If we can give people the confidence, knowledge and support to act on that ambition, the rewards will extend far beyond individual success. More businesses mean more jobs, stronger local economies and a stronger country."

The findings also point to people rethinking traditional career paths, with increasing numbers questioning whether office-based careers still offer the safest route to long-term security.

Almost eight in ten people believe skilled trades such as electricians, plumbers and builders now offer a safer long-term career than office jobs.

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Showcase for county businesses



Becca Dean on the Shropshire Festivals stand

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce held its latest 'Connectin Business' expo at Shrewsbury Town Football Club.

Exhibitors from across Shropshire showcased their products and services, following a breakfast networking event which saw a panel of business leaders taking part in a wide-ranging Q&A about some of the successes, opportunities and challenges in the local economy.



Delia Yapp and Lee Gilbert from Shropshire Company of the Year Fowler & Gilbert were part of the panel debate



Dyke Yaxley staff meeting visitors



Networking at the expo



Paul Inions of McPhillips speaking at the panel debate



Shropshire Chamber trio Grace Bywater, Jenny Pearson and Kelly Riedel



Shuker Building and Development chatting to visitors



Talking Artificial Inteligence and automation with Sygneus



The team from Information Solutions and The Web Orchard



Trish Randles, Paul Littler and Sarah Davies



Helen Spencer and Wes Harrison



Lucinda Davenport, Patrick Byrne and Dan Hayley

Launch party for wealth brand

WR Partners celebrated the official launch of its new WR Wealth brand at a reception held at Berwick House in Shrewsbury.

Guests were introduced to the company's newest service offering – a dedicated financial planning service designed to complement the accountancy, business and tax advice already provided by the firm.

WR Wealth brings together the trusted relationships clients already have with WR Partners and the specialist financial planning expertise of Benchmark Financial Planning.



Sarah Davies, Tom Davies, Helen Spencer, Simon Baker, Hannah Hampson, Tim Taylor, Paul Littler, Jenny Head and Roy Jackson



Andrew Buchan, Tim Taylor, Charlie Davies and Graham Worten



Chris Cobley, Wes Harrison and Helen Spencer



Gemma Allon, Chris Cobley, Hannah Davies, Billy-Patrick Conkie and Mrs Conkie



Musical entertainment from harpist Bethan Conway

Digital summit for businesses

Businesses were invited to discover how digital technology and artificial intelligence can support their growth at the Shropshire Digital Summit.

Organised by Shropshire Growth Hub, InSynch and Invest Telford, the event was held at Shrewsbury Town Football Club.

Experts from Intuit Mailchimp, Autm, Marketing 101, Start Tech and InSynch shared practical advice on customer engagement, digital marketing, cyber security, data governance and the responsible use of AI.



Anna Sadler from Shropshire Growth Hub with Louise Christie of Marketing 101



Adele Causer Evans, Eddy Webb, Holly Moore, Alice Hayward and Erin Scullion



Helen Pugh of Ablepreneurs and Sally Blake



Patrick Ricketts and Ally Benbow



Ruth Westwood, Matt Potts, Patricia Head and Anna Sadler



The Shropshire Digital Summit at Shrewsbury Town FC



Barbara Anthony Okafor, Adele Causer Evans and Holly Moore



The team from Invest Telford – Gavin Ashford, Erica Sherry, Elliott Payne and Tess Selby



Hands in the air – high fives from the delegates



Fran Ash, Kirsty Smallman and Steph Smith



The celebration cake



Faye Newman, Matt Sanders and Nick Bromley at the HQ building

Anniversary celebrated in style

A Shropshire networking group, which was launched to offer something different, has marked its first anniversary following a series of sell-out events.

Bathing in Business was set up by business mentor Fran Ash, founder of Fran Ash Mentoring, who also runs Ash Plumbing and Bathrooms, the Telford bathroom design and installation company, with her husband Dave.

The first anniversary celebration of Bathing in Business was held at Midlands Air Ambulance HQ in Cosford.

The group has visited a variety of venues including Frankly Farm Tours, Meeting Point House and Exotic Zoo over the last 12 months.

Fran said: "I'm ridiculously proud that my little £5 networking idea has made it to its first birthday. I had seen people put off by the very thought of standing up and doing their 60 second pitches and heard people say they were worried they wouldn't necessarily fit in with formal, corporate networking. I thought there was room in the networking calendar for something different."



Fran Ash and the Bathing in Business delegates celebrate with the Midlands Air Ambulance team



James Burrows, Lucy Edgar and Will Smith



Stacey Pugh, Laura Beaumont-Perry and Steph Smith



Fran Ash is presented with flowers



Fran Ash (founder of Bathing in Business) with Sarah Carter and Kim Goode



Mike Nixon, Fran Ash and Teri Harding



Victoria Elsmore, Melanie Morris and Beth Grant



Simon Cater, Aginieszka Browne, Fran Ash, Stacey Pugh and Benjamin Botfield

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- Chester
- Ellesmere
- Kidderminster
- Nantwich
- Northwich
- Oswestry
- Welshpool

TG CONCRETE



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- Bala
- Bangor
- Bridgnorth
- Chester
- Ellesmere
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- Newtown
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Mark Thorn, Andriane Usherwood-Brown and Karl Usherwood-Brown



Guests on the WR Partners and Berrys table



Singing waiters encouraged plenty of audience participation

Funds raised in such a brilliant atmosphere

More than £16,000 was raised for the Alzheimer's Society at the annual Pave Aways charity ball, held at Shrewsbury Town FC's stadium.

The event which drew a capacity audience of business people, included a fundraising auction which brought in more than £9,000.

The Knockin-based company said: "If this event showed us anything, it's that when people come together behind a brilliant cause, something pretty special happens.

"The atmosphere was brilliant from start to finish, with plenty of laughter, dancing, competitive bidding and more than a few surprises along the way."

Those 'surprises' included a group of singing waiters who got the whole audience on their feet, after a performance from Pave Aways' very own company choir. There was also entertainment from live band Microbaby, and close-up magic at the tables.

The event was compered once again this year by Shropshire Business editor Carl Jones.

Alzheimers's Society has been chosen as the company's charity of the year for 2026, and many of the company's staff have taken the opportunity to become 'dementia friends' to support people affected by dementia.



Live entertainment from Microbaby to end the night



A capacity audience at the Montgomery Waters Meadow



Milissa Chesters of iconsys in conversation



Start Tech, guests and friends



Bruce Orme of Wenlock Water



Guests on the McPhillips table



Start spreading the news... guests enjoying a rendition of New York, New York



Carl Jones led a fundraising auction which raised more than £9,000



Pave Aways' Steven Owen and Victoria Lawson



Guests on the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce table



Drawing the raffle



Magic tricks at the table from Will Gray



Paul Inions, Craig Hughes and Mandy Thorn



A family affair for Pave Aways managing director Steven Owen



Getting the shots in...



Shropshire Mixed Concrete was one of the sponsors



Rachel Ford from Alzheimer's Society (right) with Pave Aways duo Kelly Swannick and Sarah Jones



The team from Shuker Building & Development

Law firm investing in its growing team

Shropshire law firm Aaron & Partners has announced 15 promotions across the business as it continues to invest in developing its growing team.

Among those recognised are three colleagues from the firm's Shrewsbury office. Family solicitor Eleanor Piddock has been promoted to senior associate, while corporate and commercial solicitors Abigail Murray and Phoebe Bishton have both been promoted to associate.

Chief executive Nick Clarke said: “Investing in our people has always been central to our success, and it's fantastic to see so many individuals taking the next step on their professional journey.

"The strength of Aaron & Partners has always been our people. Whether they are advising clients, supporting colleagues or helping the firm operate effectively behind the scenes, every one of those promoted has made a valuable contribution to our continued success.”

The company has also welcomed eight new trainee solicitors who will be working across a range of practice areas including real estate, dispute resolution, employment, restructuring and insolvency, and planning, environmental, energy and regulatory law.

The new cohort includes Jessica Jones, Lucy Billington, Mia Reid, Chris Jones, Mia Guerrero and Emma Heath in Chester, alongside Abby Spalding and Emily Turnbull in Shrewsbury.

Five existing trainees are also progressing into the second year of their training contracts with the firm.



New trainees are welcomed to Aaron and Partners



Eleanor Piddock



Abigail Murray



Phoebe Bishton

James Evans will move from dispute resolution into corporate and commercial, while Kitty McCann and Rebecca Riley will both join the employment team. Anna Seddon moves from restructuring and insolvency into family law, while Scott Gilmour will join the firm’s wills, trusts and tax team. The latest intake comes as three more colleagues complete their training contracts and qualify as solicitors with Aaron & Partners, taking up permanent positions with the firm.

Beth Jones has qualified into the firm’s family team, Morgan Fisher into corporate and commercial, and Megan Riffel into real estate.

Leading on firm's expansion

Bridgnorth Aluminium has appointed a new general manager to lead the next stage of its expansion.

Ilias Avgerinos has officially joined the company’s senior leadership team and is already looking to build on a transformational two years that has seen the business return to 24/7 production and capitalise on new investments in the cast house and finishing lines.

The experienced industrialist, who has served in several senior roles at parent company Viohalco Group, believes there are significant opportunities for growth in North America and in new markets, such as electrification, energy, and defence, where the firm’s flexibility and technical expertise can add value.

He also feels the domestic market offers untapped potential, with aluminium now classed as a critical material and UK firms showing a desire to shorten supply chains and claim greater control of production.

“This is a very exciting time to be joining Bridgnorth Aluminium – a company I know well after sitting on the board since 2024,” said Ilias, who holds a degree in chemical engineering from the National Technical University of Athens.

He replaces Gerhard Trilling as general manager, and says a big part of his focus will be on the 360 people that work at the Stourbridge Road site.

Ilias is joined in the senior leadership team by another high profile hire, with Nikolina Austin announced as head of HR. The experienced human resources specialist arrives after spending more than a decade at online retailer Amazon.



Ilias Avgerinos of Bridgnorth Aluminium

Household name is the goal

Home improvements group Lapis Home has appointed Davy Thomas as its new chief marketing officer to help accelerate its brand strategy and drive business growth.

A group of UK-based home improvement businesses comprising of Instaloft, The Storage Nook, GarageFlex and Instaspark, the Telford-based company is on a mission to become a leading name in the home improvements sector.

With more than 20 years of experience in the marketing sector, Davy joins the Hortonwood business with a track record of success in senior roles for household brands including Accenture, Philips, Unilever, and Ruroc.

Ben Crouch, group managing director of Lapis Home, said: “Our goal is to make Lapis Home and its brands the most known and trusted names in UK home improvement and turn every customer into a customer for life.”

Board and committees have received a boost

Rural housing association Connexus has appointed two new non-executive directors to its Board and committees.

Thomas Heier and Angela Adimora will support long-term ambitions to improve homes, services and the customer experience across rural Shropshire and Herefordshire.

Thomas is a former chief executive of restaurant chain Wagamama, where he led the business through a period of significant change and growth. His background includes leading organisational change, shaping culture, improving the customer experience and developing strong leadership across large, complex organisations.

> “Thomas and Angela bring new ideas and have vast experience from across different sectors, including valuable expertise in culture

Angela is an experienced non-executive director and strategic people leader who has worked across healthcare, education, logistics, retail and regulated sectors. She currently serves as a non-executive and People Committee chair at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust.

In her role as a governor at the University of Salford, she sits on the university's governing council and serves as a member of the Finance and Resources committee. Angela has also served as an independent non-executive director at the Information Commissioner's Office.

Kate Smith, chief executive of Connexus, said: “Thomas and Angela bring new ideas and have vast experience from across different sectors, including valuable expertise in culture, business transformation, governance and customer experience.

“Their insight will be extremely valuable as we continue to strengthen and transform our services and deliver across the rural communities we serve.”



Angela Adimora and Thomas Heier at Connexus headquarters

Ambitious plans for next phase

Shrewsbury-based Shoothill has strengthened its senior leadership team with the promotion of Mike Davis to chief operating officer and Josh Welch to chief innovation and delivery officer.

The appointments reflect the continued growth and evolution of Shoothill, as the business expands its work across software development, managed IT, creative and digital services, and emerging technologies including AI.

Mike has played a significant role in developing Shoothill's managed IT capability and his new position will see that operational experience applied across the wider business.

Josh will take executive responsibility for the organisation and delivery of Shoothill's growing portfolio of projects, alongside leading the company's approach to innovation and AI.



From left, Josh Welch, Simon Jeavons and Mike Davis

Simon Jeavons, group managing director, said: “Shoothill has grown significantly in both the volume and breadth of work we're delivering, and our leadership structure needs to continue evolving with the business.

“We've got some ambitious plans for Shoothill and I'm delighted to have them both alongside me as we move into the next phase of the business.”



Dean Riley



Laura Fairbairn

Expertise is key to a strengthened team

Quantity surveyor CQS Solutions has strengthened its team as it continues to expand its presence across the Midlands and Wales.

The firm – which has bases in Telford, Birmingham and Welshpool – has made a number of key appointments that add decades of high-value experience to its growing team.

> Our combination of new expertise and established talent ensures the business is well-placed to support clients

Dean Riley, who has managed schemes valued at up to £32 million, joins as a senior quantity surveyor.

Laura Fairbairn has been appointed bid and operations manager, bringing more than 14 years of experience in procurement, tendering and supply chain management.



Michael Cardwell

Alongside these new appointments, the strengthened team is supported by the established expertise of Michael Cardwell, who has joined as an assistant quantity surveyor.

Owner Tim Lloyd said: "Our combination of new expertise and established talent ensures the business is well-placed to support clients with the most effective service across the full range of the construction sector."

Seven trainees with aspiration



Pictured: from left, Chloe Thomas, Hardeep Singh, Matt Brasenell, Ben Asterley, Brian Evans, Harvey Wright, Amelie Gray and Ola Muras

Seven aspiring solicitors are taking the next step in their legal careers after being awarded training contracts with Shropshire law firm Lanyon Bowdler – taking the total number of trainees at the firm to 15.

The new intake includes five people who have progressed from junior roles within the firm, alongside two new recruits, continuing a long-standing commitment to giving aspiring lawyers opportunities to develop their careers.

The five existing members of staff beginning their training contracts are: Chloe Thomas, who starts with the clinical negligence team; Ola Muras, who is training with the family team in Telford; Matthew Brasenell, who will remain with the Court of Protection team initially; Amelie Gray, who is training with the corporate and commercial team in Shrewsbury; and Harvey Wright, who joins the corporate and commercial team in Hereford.

They are joined by Ben Asterley and Hardeep Singh, who are both new to Lanyon Bowdler and are beginning their training contracts with the firm.

Each trainee will then spend time in different departments over the coming two years as they develop their knowledge across the firm.

Eight existing trainees – Alys Jones, Kelly Hughes, Cameron Petch, Ewan Higgins, Georgia Bennett, Amy Scourfield, Jessica Gough and Nicole Smith – are now moving on to their next training seat as they work towards qualifying as solicitors.

Brian Evans, managing partner at Lanyon Bowdler, said: "Developing the next generation of lawyers is important for the future of Lanyon Bowdler, but it also helps retain skills and expertise within the communities we serve. We hope this is the beginning of many long and successful careers with the firm."

Fresh ideas and opportunities

Shropshire's water supplier Severn Trent has welcomed 168 new apprentices and graduates as it continues to create opportunities for the next generation of talent.

The company is welcoming 68 graduates – its largest-ever intake – alongside 100 apprentices across 40 programmes.

Kellie Emery, new talent lead at Severn Trent, said: "At a time when opportunities for young people can feel limited, it is really exciting to welcome our class of 2026. Our apprentices and graduates bring fresh ideas, a willingness to learn and a real desire to make a difference.

"There is so much talent across the Midlands, so it's vital that we continue to create opportunities and a culture where everyone can belong and go on to achieve brilliant things with us."

Severn Trent aims to remove English and Maths qualifications as entry requirements where it can for its apprenticeships, making the programmes more accessible. It's in-house academy works with those who didn't achieve their GCSEs to get their functional skills, the equivalent, and has a 100% pass rate.

The company is also creating 400 opportunities through its Youth Guarantee and offering 500 school-age work experience placements.

Specialist vein service opens in county



Matt Popplewell, vascular surgeon at Premier Veins

Steve Jones and Matt Popplewell have joined the team at Premier Veins, which has opened a clinic at Technology House, Hadley Park East, in Telford.

Director Martin Claridge said: "We're proud to work with some of the UK's leading vascular specialists, so we're delighted to welcome Steve and Matt as part of the surgical team at our new Telford clinic."

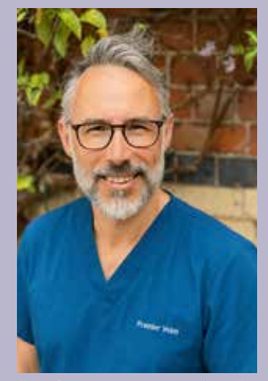
Steve is a consultant vascular surgeon at Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Community and Hospitals NHS Group. He qualified from the University of Leeds School of Medicine in 2001 and trained in Vascular and Endovascular Surgery in Leeds, Liverpool, and New South Wales, Australia.

He said: "It's fantastic to see a specialist vein service being established in Shropshire, giving local patients greater access to experienced vascular surgeons and modern treatment options."

Matt is a consultant vascular surgeon at Russell's Hall Hospital and Assistant Professor at the University of Birmingham, specialising in the diagnosis and treatment of varicose veins and chronic venous disease.

He completed his medical training at Keele and Manchester Universities before pursuing higher surgical training, and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.

Premier Veins has received the Best for Varicose Vein Treatments UK award by Global 100 for four consecutive years.



"Modern treatment options" – Steve Jones, vascular surgeon

Ethos will continue with new chamber chairman

Shrewsbury Business Chamber has appointed local businessman Estaban Bridges as its new chair, succeeding Kevin Lockwood after eight years in the role.

Kevin, who will remain involved as president of the Chamber, said: "It's been a privilege to be the chairman of Shrewsbury Business Chamber for the last eight years.

"Estaban brings a wealth of experience and knowledge from running multiple businesses and will continue the ethos of Shrewsbury Business Chamber: for businesses to have a voice, to learn and to prosper, which has been established since 1903."

Estaban brings first-hand experience of starting and growing independent businesses in Shrewsbury. His working life in retail began at 16 and his entrepreneurial journey later took him to Shrewsbury Market, where he launched DVDMEGASTORE through The Prince's Trust New Enterprise Initiative. He went on to build a portfolio of businesses as well as supporting other entrepreneurs.

> It's been a privilege to be the chairman of Shrewsbury Business Chamber for the last eight years

Estaban said: "I am thankful to the Board for giving me this opportunity to continue the positive growth and impact Kevin and others have had on the expansion of Shrewsbury Business Chamber.

"I look forward to bringing my passion, enthusiasm and experience to the role, supporting more events, welcoming new members and building on our position as a champion for the amazing range of businesses Shrewsbury has to offer."

Shrewsbury Business Chamber is a not-for-profit, member-led organisation supporting and representing businesses across Shrewsbury and the surrounding area. It gives local businesses a collective voice and provides opportunities to make connections, share knowledge and engage with the organisations shaping the town's economic future.



Kevin Lockwood welcomes Estaban Bridges

Five minutes with . . .

MARK HOOPER is the tourism lead for Visit Shropshire, alongside running The Creatory – a marketing business supporting tourism and hospitality businesses – and operating Shropshire's Film Office



Mark Hooper

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN YOUR CURRENT JOB?
Seven years. I joined Visit Shropshire in October 2019, having previously been office manager at The Sabrina Boat in Shrewsbury. I was brought in by the Visit Shropshire Board to establish the organisation, launching on the very day the country went into the first national lockdown (coincidentally!)

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ECONOMY?
Hugely. I've seen first-hand how quickly changes in the economy affect the businesses I work with. When money is tight, people cut back on days out, eating out and holidays, while businesses face rising costs. It means I'm constantly adapting how I support and promote Shropshire and help businesses navigate an unpredictable industry.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON HYBRID AND FLEXIBLE WORKING – IS IT STILL NEEDED, OR PRACTICAL?
I think hybrid working definitely has a place, but personally I can only work from home for a couple of days before I need to get out and see people. It's about finding the right balance – flexibility is important, but so are face-to-face relationships.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON YOUR BUSINESS?
Really interesting question. AI has already had a big impact on how we work, saving businesses time and helping us analyse visitor data in much more detail. But I think there's a limit to what it can replace. In destinations like Shropshire, the personal touch and the passion people have for their businesses is still incredibly important, and I don't think AI can replicate that.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?
Someone who is full of ideas, passionate and always looking for the next opportunity. They'd probably also say that sometimes I need to focus on one idea at a time! My head is constantly thinking about new projects and ways of doing things.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?
Presenting. It's something I absolutely hated doing when I was younger, until I was forced to give a presentation while studying Business Studies at Shrewsbury College. Something just clicked, and I haven't looked back since.

BIGGEST CURRENT CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?
For the past couple of years, I'd say the economy. Tourism in Shropshire is booming and worth more than £1 billion a year, but rising costs are still making it difficult for businesses to invest, grow and plan for the future.



Mark with Sarah Creighton on the Great Expectations set

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?
Through Film Shropshire, helping to bring the filming of BBC One's Great Expectations to Shrewsbury. It was fantastic to see the town transformed for filming, but even more rewarding was seeing so many local businesses benefit from the production and having Shrewsbury showcased to such a huge national audience.

PET HATES?
Slow decision-making processes. I'm someone who likes to get things moving and make things happen.

IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF SOME WISE ADVICE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
Slow down a little and think carefully about which direction you want to grow in. When we started the business, I said yes to almost everything, but I've learnt that knowing what to say no to is just as important.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?
Spending time with my wife, our little boy Ted, and Wilson our Labrador. We love exploring Wales, going for walks and finding somewhere good to eat afterwards.



Mark still has his Sabrina Boat driving licence



Great Expectations being filmed in Shrewsbury

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?
It has to be the great outdoors – from the hills in the south and canal walks in the north, to the bustling towns and villages in between. There's such a variety of landscapes and places to explore.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?
LinkedIn or Facebook – feeling slightly old now!

FAVOURITE MOVIE AND/OR TV SHOW?
Game of Thrones – which I really didn't think I'd like when I was first told about it, but I was completely hooked.

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?
Definitely an early bird – which is the complete opposite of the rest of the household.

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?
Richard Branson. I've looked up to the Virgin brand since I was young and admired how it has continually moved into different industries and shaken things up.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOU THAT MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY WOULDN'T KNOW.
I still hold my licence to drive the Sabrina Boat in Shrewsbury.

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE?
Personally, the family is due to grow by one in February, so I'm sure that will keep us very busy! Professionally, I'm really keen to work with more businesses, particularly in tourism and hospitality, and help them grow and expand the ways they market themselves.

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