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MIDLANDS MEDIA AWARDS
Magazine of the Year – winner



SHROPSHIRE CHAMBER AWARDS
Best New Business (SBLTV)

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TALKING POINT

Budget 2024: Employers give their reaction to one of the most anticipated and controversial Budget statements in years. What does it mean for your business? See Pages 6-8.



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By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor

SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

Businesses aren't all that keen on change, so it's little wonder that emotions have been running high in recent weeks.

A new Government, a new Chancellor, and new ideas around tax-and-spend policies have added up to a great deal of unease in recent weeks.

As the dust starts to settle on Rachel Reeves' first Budget, was it better or worse than you expected? And how are her policy changes going to impact on your company's productivity, profitability or job satisfaction levels?

We canvassed instant reaction across a broad range of sectors around the county, starting overleaf. Don't forget, you can read more local business views on our website.

There has been much cause for county-wide celebration lately, including the inaugural Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards. Check out our special report and photo gallery from a night of feelgood celebration which should be the first of many – the organisers have already agreed to bring the event back next year.

We also dropped into another 'first' to hear from an impressive array of high-profile speakers at Peakefest, such as Dragons' Den TV star and crafting queen Sara Davies. Check out our report and pictures from the Apley Estate festival, starting on page 38.

We're raising a glass too in this edition to the county's growing catalogue of vineyards. Shropshire has long been recognised as a hotbed of top independent breweries, but there's also been something of a wine-producing explosion in recent years.

Our expert columnists tackle a broad range of topics this time, including a question which any business trading online would like to answer – how to get to the top of the search engine rankings.

Plus, they examine how to get a business to listen if you have a complaint to make. Finding a way to speak to a real human being is sometimes hard enough, isn't it?

Evolution is a crucial ingredient for business success, and we consider the impact of a changing workforce demographic, where Gen Z is driving vast cultural shifts and changes to how work is approached.

As an employer, are you aware of their attitudes to making telephone calls, and face-to-face business networking, which could differ wildly from your own? It seems we ignore these aspects at our peril.

There's our usual mixture of promotions, new appointments, relocations and contract-winning success stories, and we once again spotlight some more of the county's start-up success stories, and long-serving staff reaching significant milestones.

As this is our final edition of 2024, it just remains for me to say, on behalf of our fantastic Shropshire Business team, a big thank you to everyone who has supported us once again this year.

More people are now reading our magazine than ever. Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin is our core readership, of course, but our reach now stretches as far as the USA, Australia, and Asia.

It means we are spreading word of Shropshire's business success stories far and wide, which makes us very happy!

We wish you all a happy and healthy festive period, and look forward to working with you, and sharing more of your success stories, in the New Year.

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A heavy burden to bear?



It's been described as the most significant Budget in a generation – so what did Shropshire employers make of the new Chancellor's tax-raising bonanza? CARL JONES canvassed local reaction.

Businesses crave stability. They want the confidence to invest, the encouragement to be entrepreneurial, and the support to thrive.

With the business community being expected to shoulder around two thirds of the record-breaking £40 billion tax-raising Budget, there is instead a long list of concerns.

The Chancellor's aim, she said, was to close a cavernous Whitehall spending gap without a 'return to austerity'. And that meant bracing us for tax rises, rather than spending cuts.

So was all the leaking of headlines during the second half of October a thinly-veiled attempt to prepare employers for what was coming, and soften the blow?

This was a Budget which, to quote one company director, will 'challenge the fabric of our economy and values'.

There is a feeling that, for a significant number of Shropshire employers already operating on tight margins, the increase in employer National Insurance to raise £25 billion could prompt a re-evaluation of salary structures and reduce the prospect of future pay rises.

It has also been suggested that some companies may choose to stop sharing



James Clark from WR Partners

employer NI savings on salary sacrificed pension contributions.

"Rachel Reeves cautioned that it would be a painful Budget, with those bearing the broadest shoulders shouldering the greatest burden, and it seems businesses and business owners will feel the impact most," said James Clark, tax partner at WR Partners in Shrewsbury.

"While some of the tax increases were expected, the severity of them were perhaps not.

"As rumoured, there will be an increase in the rate of National Insurance paid by employers, rising from 13.8% to 15% from April. To make matters worse, the threshold at which employers pay the tax will reduce from £9,100 to £5,000.

"There was some good news for small employers though, with the announcement that the Employment Allowance (the 0% band) will increase from £5,000 to £10,500. This, the Government says, will allow small businesses to employ four workers on minimum wage without an increase to their National Insurance bill."

It was anticipated that Inheritance Tax rates, allowances or thresholds would change, but the Chancellor kept the rate at 40% and the tax-free amount at £325,000.

The most 'difficult news', according to James, was this: "Until now, business owners and farmers have been shielded from Inheritance Tax on their business and agricultural assets.

"However, starting in April 2026, this protection will change. From that point forward, only the first £1 million in combined business and agricultural assets will be exempt from IHT, while the remaining value will receive just 50% relief – effectively taxing these assets at 20%. This marks the end of passing on a business or agricultural interest to the next generation without potential tax implications.



Rachel Reeves delivers Labour's first Budget in 14 years

"The Government will, however, introduce legislation to extend the scope of Agricultural Relief to environmental land management from April 2025.

"In a more worrying announcement, the Chancellor announced there will be a consultation to bring unused pension pots into the scope of Inheritance Tax from April 2027. There was also an announcement that 100% IHT relief for shares on the AIM and similar markets would reduce to 50%."

Probably the least best-kept secret was the increase to Capital Gains Tax rates, but it was not quite as bad as many had feared. The rates for residential property sales have been maintained at 18% for basic rate taxpayers and 24% for those in the higher band.

"Most people expected CGT rates to increase in line with income tax rates, so this announcement was a bit of an anti-climax," James said.

While the smallest employers will be protected from an increase to employer NICs, many others will see their bills go up, which organisations including the British Safety Council feel could put new jobs at risk.

The Chancellor said she had 'come to the conclusion that extending the freeze on tax thresholds would hurt working people' and announced no extension of the freeze in income tax and National Insurance thresholds beyond 2028. They will then be updated in line with inflation. Until then, though, 'fiscal drag' from inflation will continue to boost the Government's tax coffers.

Although some of the predicted drastic pension tax changes didn't materialise, many in the industry feel the damage has already been done. Weeks of speculation and rumoured sweeping reforms left savers anxious, causing many to rethink their retirement strategies.

So what has the local business community made of it all?

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce says many businesses are now faced with 'hugely escalating cost pressures'.

Chief executive Ruth Ross said: "Confidence is still brittle in our economy, and we needed a Budget which gives Shropshire businesses the confidence to invest, and the ability to thrive.

"There is no doubt that the rise in National Insurance for employers, on the back of the above inflation increase in the National Minimum Wage, will put a big dent in profitability and be a big worry to many employers. The likelihood is that some of these additional costs are now going to be passed on to customers, which could in turn put pressure on inflation."

She added: "This is the largest tax-raising Budget in a generation, and businesses – many still struggling to recover from the ravages of the pandemic – are being asked to shoulder the biggest burden.

"I'm concerned that raising the rate and lowering the threshold for employers' National Insurance will particularly hit Shropshire companies that are employing lower paid workers.

"Combined with the increase in the National Living Wage and other measures associated with the Make Work Pay agenda, many of our businesses will see hugely escalating cost pressures."

Ruth did welcome some of the announcements in the speech, including a decision to freeze fuel duty – particularly important for rural areas – a tax cut on draught beers to help the pub trade, and business rate relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure industry.

But she added: "We would have liked to have seen a root-and-branch revamp of the business rates system to help our High Street traders to compete on a level playing field with online retailers."

Budget headlines

- Employers' National Insurance contributions to increase by 1.2% to 15%, to raise £25 billion
- NI employment allowance for small businesses increased from £5,000 to £10,500
- Capital Gains Tax: Lower rate rises from 10% to 18%, higher rate up from 20% to 24%
- Inheritance Tax: Current threshold extended until 2030, but inherited pensions will be included from 2027
- Business Rates: 40% relief for retail, leisure and hospitality businesses for next two years
- Freeze on Income Tax and NI thresholds will not be extended beyond 2028
- Duty introduced on vaping liquid, and rises in tobacco taxes
- Borrowing levels will be £127 billion this year
- £1.8 billion for victims of Post Office IT scandal
- 'Get Britain Working' white paper to tackle inactivity
- Every Government department to make cuts of 2%
- Minimum wage for over 21s to rise by 6.7%
- Minimum wage for 18-20s to rise by 16.3%
- Fuel duty frozen for another year
- Electric vehicle car tax incentives maintained
- VAT exemption for private schools to be scrapped from January
- Cutting duty on draught beers by 1.7% to boost pubs
- Maintaining full expensing
- Abolition of 'non-dom' tax regime
- Core schools' budget to rise by £2.3 billion in 2025
- £300 million extra cash for further education sector
- £2.9 billion increase in defence spending next year
- £3 billion annual commitment to support Ukraine 'as long as it takes'
- New 'investment rule' to recalculate levels of financial debt
- £5 billion to support target of 1.5 million new homes a year
- £1.4 billion to rebuild schools
- £500 million in road maintenance budget



Graham Corfield (CEO of Aviramp)

Mark Barrow speaking at the Shropshire Constructing Excellence event

◀ "This is long overdue, and has been swerved again."

Neil Phillips, of Telford-based accountancy firm Phillips Limited, said: "To seek to raise £25 billion of the £40 billion tax rises from one type of tax – Employer's NI – is unfair and places too much burden on employers, although the increase in the employment allowance to £10,500 is welcome for small businesses."

"I think that Employer's NI is one of the most illogical taxes we have because employers should not be punished for employing staff, and it is unfair on labour-intensive businesses compared to those businesses who do not need many staff because of perhaps extensive automation. One day there will no doubt be a 'robot tax!'"

Hollie Whittles, director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford, said: "I am concerned about the changes that will affect business owners. The statement mentions protecting working people – however owners of businesses have not been afforded that protection. The rises in tax will likely impact investment and entrepreneurship which this budget was supposed to be about."

Claire Brook, employment law partner at Shrewsbury-based Aaron & Partners, believes many small businesses will see the hike in NI contributions as a considerable burden at a time when they are already managing a complex cost landscape.

"Beyond the direct increase in payroll expenses, an increase of 1.2% and a reduction in the threshold at which employers start paying from £9,100 to £5,000 will bring additional administrative requirements, as companies adjust budgeting, payroll processes, and financial forecasting to accommodate the changes.

"For smaller businesses especially, these may stretch resources as they work hard to balance new costs with ongoing investment in staff and operations. Employers looking to support their teams and sustain growth will need to factor these increases into business planning, potentially impacting hiring decisions and wage and employee benefits structures in some sectors."

Anton Gunter, managing director of Global Freight Services in Telford, said: "As expected Labour is back in power and guess what? Taxes go up. Spending is up and the only way to pay for the spending is to increase taxes on an easy target. And that target is private business."

"There have been no tax breaks for business. There has been no acknowledgment of how business got the UK through both Brexit and Covid, yet as the new Government settles down and starts its work and ultimately starts to spend money that it doesn't have, someone has to cough up . . . and it's manufacturers and businesses that will foot the bill.



Claire Brook of Aaron & Partners

"Nowhere is there any relief for small to medium sized business in terms of higher running costs. The Government's biggest problem is that they don't actually know who they are targeting; working people, non-working people, big business, little business, rich people, poor people. I wish we could get people in power who actually run businesses to give their inputs into what we need as a business community."

Alasdair Hobbs, owner of Human Results in Telford, believes the minimum wage and National Insurance hike is going to make smaller employers especially think twice about their resources.

"I worry that it will impact on the number of training opportunities for graduates, and a rise in youth unemployment in particular. I can understand why small business owners in particular will be feeling rather frustrated."

Carrie Stokes, of Spotlight Accounting in Shifnal, thinks Inheritance Tax will now require 'much more strategic planning' for many people.

"With higher employer National Insurance contributions, new employment rights starting from day one, shorter waiting periods for sick pay, and a higher minimum wage, many small businesses may be cautious about expanding their workforce. Labour-intensive sectors, in particular, may need to raise prices to manage these increased costs effectively."

Johnny Themans, of Bridgnorth-based business growth specialists Good2Great, said: "The burden of raising funds has certainly landed on businesses, but it's encouraging to see some protections in place for our smallest enterprises, along with measures for entrepreneurial investment and High Street businesses."

"The changes to entrepreneurs' relief, however, raise concerns, as we may see some business owners bringing forward their exit plans. This is a significant shake-up, albeit one

that many anticipated. Now, more than ever, we need a period of stability and a supportive, growth-focused message from the Government. Creating an environment where small businesses can thrive is essential for sustaining our local economy."

Graham Corfield, founder of Telford-based aviation specialist Aviramp, welcomed talk of new investment in green initiatives and the publication of a roadmap setting out the tax policies businesses can expect from Labour over the current term of government.

But he said making it more expensive for businesses to employ people by putting up National Insurance payments for employers was the wrong policy for a Government that claimed to be promoting growth.

"The National Insurance hike for employers not only breaks the spirit of the promise made in the Labour Party's election manifesto, it undermines the Government's claim to be driving growth."

According to a survey by BDO, nearly a quarter of Midlands businesses wanted a commitment from the Government to replace business rates, potentially with a local business income tax.

Instead, they got support for specific sectors such as leisure, retail and hospitality for a limited period.

While welcomed, the popular view is that this just skirted round an urgent need to help all High Street traders operate on a level playing field with online retailers. It kicked the can down the road, again.

What businesses did get from the Chancellor was a helping hand for the hard-pressed pubs sector, with a cut in duty on draught ales. The question is, will it be enough to save more of our country pubs from closure?

With the raft of tax increases announced, there is a concern that the cut may get lost and the price of a pint won't actually end up costing any less.

The construction industry is pivotal to the success of our economy – a fact which was emphasised at a 'meet the buyer' event in Telford, organised by Shropshire Constructing Excellence.

So the £5 billion commitment to support target of 1.5 million new homes a year was positively received.

Mark Barrow, who chairs Shropshire Constructing Excellence, told the event how the sector now supports some 9,000 jobs in Shropshire and generates over £1 billion a year to the county.

If you take into account that every £1 spent on construction-related work is multiplied nearly three-fold in terms of economic benefit, the potential economic impact for our county between now and 2032 will be over £16 billion. 📊



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Inaugural awards for apprentices

Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin had never had its own apprenticeship awards . . . until now. A sell-out audience enjoyed a fantastic night of celebration.

The first ever Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards were a huge success – with plans already in place to repeat the event next year.

A capacity audience of 250 people gathered at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel where 10 category winners were announced, alongside apprentice of the year champions for both Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

The event was created to celebrate the brightest apprentices in the area, and recognise employers for their support of apprenticeship programmes.

Luke Courtnell of McPhillips was named Telford & Wrekin apprentice of the year, having also won the construction apprentice of the year award. Colleagues at the civil engineering firm say he has 'set the bar for excellence and career progression' through the McPhillips Apprenticeship Scheme, run in partnership with Telford College.

Luke has risen to assistant site manager in less than two years and has now moved on to a Level 6 NVQ in construction site management.

Kieran Jones of Shropshire Council won the Shropshire apprentice of the year title alongside the business, legal and finance trophy. He started his journey as a supported intern in the Right Home, Right Place team and

then went into an inclusive apprenticeship. He now works full time as a business support officer for the office of the chief executive, and achieved a triple distinction in his apprenticeship.

WR Partners of Shrewsbury was named best large apprentice employer of the year. The accountancy and business support firm recruits between 10 and 20 apprentices every year and has opened a new study hub – a digital learning platform to support its students.

The medium-sized apprentice employer award was won by Pave Aways of Knockin, a former Shropshire company of the year with a long-standing tradition of fostering apprentices. To date, the building firm has kick-started at least 70 people's careers through apprenticeships.

The prize for small employer of the year went to communications firm Connexis of Telford. Since 2009, four out of five of its engineers have joined as apprentices, and one has now risen to become a director.

The competition was backed by some of the county's biggest and best names, led by headline sponsors Aico of Oswestry and Telford College, and supported by the Marches Careers Hub. It was organised by award-winning Shropshire events company Yarrington, in partnership with Shropshire Business Live TV which filmed the event for broadcast over the coming days.

Headline sponsors were Aico and Telford College, and Ryan Evans and Lawrence Wood took part in a question and answer session at the start of the night. Andriane Usherwood-Brown of Marches Careers Hub, which also supported the event, took to the stage after dinner for an interview.

Carl Jones, producer and presenter at SBLTV who hosted the awards, said: "The quality and volume of entries surpassed all expectations, and the judges said they faced a very difficult task narrowing down each category to three finalists – let alone choosing the winners.

"It's been an incredibly successful event, and we're looking forward to making it a regular fixture on the Shropshire business calendar.

"We're incredibly grateful to everyone who has supported us and made this fantastic event possible.

"We're also delighted with the feedback we have received from those who attended. Many have asked us whether we are planning to run the competition again in 2025 – watch this space. We hope to announce a date very soon."

Guests were entertained at the end of the evening by award-winning tribute artist Andy James, as Elvis – the legendary singer who is described as the most famous apprentice in the world, having started his life as a trainee electrician.



Abigail Jones with Paul Hodgetts of In-Comm Training



The pre-dinner drinks reception

MANUFACTURING AND ENGINEERING,
sponsored by In-Comm Training



WINNER: Abigail Jones. She's described as someone who has consistently performed above expectations during the four years of her apprenticeship with i2r Packaging. She has been recognised nationally as a trailblazer for women in engineering, training with Telford College.

FINALIST: Tom Farquharson. He joined Iconsys in Telford as a mature apprentice – getting inspiration to be an engineer from his grandad. He has done his training with Shrewsbury Colleges Group and is described as a team player, always putting himself forward for tasks.

FINALIST: Mitchell Taylor. His employer, Elite Precast Concrete in Telford, says he represents the true nature of apprenticeships. He had no practical experience of electrics or relevant education but had a desire to learn and wanted a career. He also trains through Telford College.

IT AND DIGITAL INDUSTRIES,
sponsored by Purple Frog Systems



WINNER: Christa Bridges. She started her apprenticeship with PebblePad amidst the challenges that Covid-19 presented, having to adapt to online learning and remote collaboration. Now on target to become a senior application developer where she will help to train future apprentices.

FINALIST: Mary Harris. She joined Ascendancy of Newport in 2021 and truly excelled. Mary has been promoted to executive and has continued to thrive, and is well on her way to becoming a full account manager. She is also a mentor to new apprentices Alice and Madeline.

FINALIST: Ryan Ward. Start-Tech made him project technician apprentice, a first for them. He completed a Level 3 ICT apprenticeship course with distinction and says: "I used to be sceptical about apprenticeships, but my opinion has changed – they provide a great opportunity to learn and earn."



Charlie Grimston of Purple Frog presents the award to Christa Bridges



A sell-out audience at the Mercure Telford Centre hotel



The team from Purple Frog Systems



Rebecca Clarke from the University of Chester with Chris Sheldon



Natasha Fox of Dyke Yaxley with Kieran Jones



Victoria Lawson of Pave Aways with Luke Courtnell



Rhea Draycott receives the creative and media trophy from Lesley Allsop



Andriane Usherwood-Brown of Marches Careers Hub chats on stage



Francesca Farruggio, health and social care finalist



The awards get under way

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE, sponsored by University of Chester



WINNER: Chris Sheldon. After leaving school Chris undertook a health and social care course then worked two jobs – teaching assistant and domiciliary care worker. He was among the first cohort of apprentices at University Centre Shrewsbury, and has now qualified as a social worker, supporting others to follow in his footsteps.

FINALIST: Francesca Farruggio. She joined the education support unit at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, combining her work with studies at Telford College. The team say Fran has grown significantly in developing her communication skills, problem solving skills and mentoring support.

FINALIST: Rachel Palin. She is combining her work at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust with studies at the University of Chester, and has been at SATH since 2021. On hearing about the Nursing Associate apprenticeship she worked as a health care assistant for a year so she could apply for the apprenticeship.

CONSTRUCTION, sponsored by Pave Aways



WINNER: Luke Courtnell. “Exemplary” – that’s the McPhillips team’s verdict of someone they say has set the bar for excellence and career progression through the company apprenticeship scheme, in partnership with Telford College. He has risen to assistant site manager in less than two years and moved on to a Level 6 NVQ.

FINALIST: Harry Barrett. Harry combines his work at SJ Roberts Construction with studies at Shrewsbury College. One of his managers, Tom Buy, says: “Harry’s attitude is what we need to see in all apprentices. No matter what he’s asked to do, however challenging or awkward, he does it to his full potential.”

FINALIST: Joe Shingler. His work at Shingler Group has earned him national recognition. Steven Wainright, Joe’s brickwork lecturer says: “Joe’s bricklaying skills, knowledge and keen interest in the industry have made him into the top bricklaying apprentice in the country. He is a credit to his company, family and college.”

BUSINESS, LEGAL AND FINANCE, sponsored by Dyke Yaxley



WINNER: Kieran Jones. Kieran started his Shropshire Council journey as a Supported Intern in the Right Home, Right Place Team. He now works full time as a Business Support Officer for the Office of the Chief Executive and is an advocate for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

FINALIST: Marloe Nudds. Marloe joined WR Partners in 2021 as an accounts associate, on an apprenticeship while pursuing his ACCA qualification. He has primarily worked with the Rural Team, quickly advancing to handle more complex accounts.

FINALIST: Maisie Evans. She has a rural background with a keen interest in agriculture and undertook work experience with Berrys, deciding she wanted to become a Rural Chartered Surveyor. She joined in 2019 and began a five-year degree apprenticeship with Harper Adams University.

CREATIVE AND MEDIA, sponsored by SBLTV



WINNER: Rhea Draycott. As the marketing and events apprentice at Shropshire Festivals – the team behind events such as the Shrewsbury Food Festival – she has filmed and edited numerous promotional videos, helped with set-up of events, and approaches everything with a smile and a can-do attitude.

FINALIST: Jenny Evans. She joined the Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Hospital communications team in July 2022, completing a Level 4 Higher Apprenticeship in public relations and communications. Her tutors describe her as an extremely dedicated learner.

FINALIST: Ella Shorthouse. She embarked on her apprenticeship journey with Buy-From.com driven by a passion for digital marketing and a desire to gain hands-on experience while continuing her education. Colleagues say determination and motivation are evident in her approach to every task.



Celebrations for the team from McPhillips



Read all about it – Ian Groves of Start-Tech



Sharing a laugh on the Ascendancy table



Fun and games were order of the day



The room was full of laughter and smiles



Lawrence Wood and Beckie Bosworth



Shropshire apprentice of the year Kieran Jones with Ryan Evans of Aico



Elvis tribute artist Andy James leaves guests all shook up



Fabweld staff and guests



An enjoyable evening was had by all



Dancing at the after-show party



Carl Jones in conversation with Ryan Evans of Aico and Lawrence Wood from Telford College



Elvis was in the building



Guests on the Aico table



Dyke Yaxley – sponsors and finalists



The Ascendancy table



The Elite Precast Concrete delegation



Sponsors and finalists



Guests on the Iconsys table



SJ Roberts Construction



Telford College, one of the headline sponsors



The team from Buy-from.com



Early years winner Kiran Kaur with Michelle Beardshaw



Connexis of Telford, small employer of the year

EARLY YEARS AND EDUCATION, sponsored by WR Partners



WINNER: Kiran Kaur. Kiran is a mature student with a young family who returned to education. Colleagues at Trench Tots say Kiran has been a consistent and professional role model in the workplace and at Telford College, and a huge source of support to all that work with and alongside her.

FINALIST: Tom Miles. He has a positive attitude to learning, and always goes above and beyond in supporting and guiding others, showing professionalism and respect to all. He is described by colleagues at Castle House School in Newport as hard working, welcoming and friendly.

FINALIST: Zoe Gray. She is described as a confident and competent teaching assistant apprentice at Southall School in Telford, who is well regarded by everyone. In addition to her apprenticeship, Zoe is extremely active in her local community with projects including the "Young People Making Changes" initiative.

SMALL EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (companies employing up to 25 staff), sponsored by McPhillips



WINNER: Connexis, Telford. Since 2009, four in five of the company's engineers joined as apprentices – one rising to the role of technical director. The company originally embraced apprenticeships after finding it difficult to hire people with the right skills and attitude. It says: "Apprenticeships are central to our recruitment – identifying and nurturing talent that fits our culture."

FINALIST: Ascendancy, Newport. The company says its motivation for employing apprentices is based on an experience that with the right support, they excel and significantly enhance the business. Notably, 50% of current staff began as apprentices. Since 2015, it has employed nine apprentices aged 16 to 26, offering a structured development pathway.

FINALIST: Start-Tech, Shrewsbury. The IT support company has 19 employees – seven of which started out as apprentices, which includes two of the management team. It sees apprenticeships as a way of creating a true career path into IT where skills are developed. Start-Tech apprenticeships typically last 12-24 months and include monthly informal one-to-ones to check in on wellbeing and progression.



Pave Aways, medium employer of the year, with Matthew Roberts of SJ Roberts Construction



WR Partners, large employer of the year, with Northwood's Gavina Hitchcock

MEDIUM EMPLOYER (companies employing 25-100 staff), sponsored by SJ Roberts Construction



WINNER: Pave Aways, Knockin. The former Shropshire company of the year has a long-standing tradition of fostering talent through its apprenticeship programme. To date, the construction company has kick-started at least 70 apprentices' journeys and has been committed to recruiting at least three apprentices every year over the last 15 years.

FINALIST: Fabweld Steel Products, Telford: Since being founded in 1998 it has provided over 50 apprenticeships, providing many young people with the skills required to go on to have successful careers. Managing director Wayne Carner started on a welding apprenticeship himself back in 1990 and has progressed through the ranks to hold the top job.

FINALIST: Shingler Group, Myddle. It has been running an apprenticeship programme for six years and seen over 20 students find passion for their trade during their time on site and at Shrewsbury Colleges Group. The company says: "We watch them grow from nervous school leavers into confident young people with experience and enthusiasm for their craft."

LARGE EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (companies employing over 100 staff), sponsored by Northwood Hygiene Products



WINNER: WR Partners, Shrewsbury. With a philosophy of "growing their own," the company recruits between 10 and 20 new apprentices each year and offers a range of professional qualifications along with funded CPD programmes to support their ongoing learning. This year, it launched a Study Hub, a new digital platform providing comprehensive support to students.

FINALIST: McPhillips, Telford. More than 150 people have kick-started their career in construction, thanks to the success of the McPhillips Apprenticeship Scheme. The company employs 240 people – with around 30% of the current workforce being graduates of the in-house, two-year apprenticeship programme. It has been partnered with Telford College since 2010.

FINALIST: Dyke Yaxley, Shrewsbury. The company takes on five or six new apprentices every year. Since 2016, it has put 41 through professional exams – three quarters of whom are still with the company, reinforcing increased retention and staff satisfaction. Progression is encouraged, and many apprentices now hold senior roles in the business.



The Halls Commercial team celebrate victory at the awards night in Birmingham

Team 'on cloud nine'

It's been a memorable few weeks for the team at Halls, which has won a top regional award and opened a new office in the county.

The Shrewsbury-based commercial team said it was 'still on cloud nine' after being crowned Commercial Team of the Year at the annual Midland Property and Investment Awards.

"It's a testament to the incredible hard work and dedication of our entire team," said James Evans, who heads up the team.

"I want to extend a huge thank you to our loyal clients for their unwavering support, to the awards organisers, and to all the fellow winners and nominees.

"The night truly showcased the strength of the Midlands property sector. I've been overwhelmed by the kind messages received from all corners of the industry."

Halls Commercial beat six Midlands rivals to collect the coveted award at the ceremony in Birmingham – based on a combination of public votes, and views of a judging panel.

The Commercial Agency Team of the Year award is for agencies providing leasing, sales and acquisition advice, development strategy and professional services to the commercial property sector.

James said: "I am delighted that the hard work and dedication of the team has been recognised. This fantastic award provides a springboard for the company to continue to drive forward with organic growth and expansion.

"We didn't expect to win because we were up against much bigger companies but it shows that we are punching well above our weight. We now work across the UK, as demonstrated by the sale and purchase of properties from Plymouth to Glasgow in the last year."

Halls managing director Jon Quinn added: "This award is well



Steve Bull with Wellington branch manager Matt Gilbert, sales negotiator Charli Wisdom and sales assistant Isabelle Honicke



James Evans, head of the Halls Commercial team, with the award

deserved for the exceptional work and dedication of James and his team. James is literally the first person in the office in the morning and the last person to leave at the end of the day.

"He has worked so hard to build the commercial department and has an excellent team to support him."

Launched last year, the awards celebrate and showcase excellence and innovation in the Midlands' property sector and recognise the outstanding achievements of companies, teams and individuals.

Meanwhile, Wolves goalscoring legend Steve Bull cut a ribbon to officially open Halls' new branch in Wellington, which takes the company's network of offices across Shropshire, Worcestershire and Mid Wales to ten.

The new Market Street branch is not far away from an office the company previously occupied many years ago when it was known as Hall, Wateridge and Owen.

Branch manager Matt Gilbert and his team – sales negotiator Charli Wisdom and sales assistant Isabelle Honicke – said they had been delighted with the warm welcome from customers.

See the wood for the trees

A Newport-based insurance company has launched a new division that specialises in supporting owners of woodlands.

Woodways is a new arm of Fiveways Insurance Group, which has offices in Shropshire and Staffordshire.

The family business, which has this year become a patron of Shropshire Chamber, is run by Nigel West with his wife Lisa and son Daniel.

Nigel said: "The opportunity arose to secure a portfolio of woodland owners from across the UK, and we didn't hesitate.

"This is just the beginning for Woodways woodland insurance, and we are looking forward to meeting with woodland owners to learn from each other and share



The Tree Manual, sponsored by Woodways

knowledge to develop the scheme."

Emma Whittall, who has worked for Fiveways Insurance Group for more than 21 years, has been promoted to head up the Woodways team.

The woodland insurance scheme launched by Woodways is available to all owners of woodlands across the UK, and has already inspired new collaborations.

The Small Woods Association, Telford-based experts in the field of sustainable woodland management and social forestry, will be working with Woodways.

The company is also sponsoring a number of educational products being developed by Herefordshire-based Cedarwood Tree Consultants, including 'The Tree Manual', a guide to some of the UK's favourite trees.

Association, Telford-based experts in the field of sustainable woodland management and social forestry, will be working with Woodways.

Full steam ahead for talented engineers



Sam Foster and Oliver Greenhalgh at the UK Metals Expo

Bridgnorth Aluminium has been showcasing the talents of its next generation of budding engineers at one of the sector's leading exhibitions.

First-year apprentices Oliver Greenhalgh and Sam Foster impressed visitors to the UK Metals Expo with the way they designed and manufactured a steam train out of scrap metal.

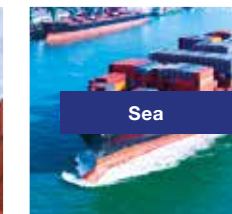
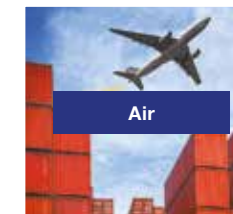
The trainee mechanical engineers spent 20 hours of their own time developing the aluminium model, which was displayed at both the BAL stand and the Café De Arts area next to the Olympic Torch used in London 2012.

"Growing our own staff is very important to the business and we do this by investing in our apprentices and giving them the responsibility and opportunities to grow," explained Adam Hunter, deputy general manager at Bridgnorth Aluminium.



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Inability, inexperience and a lack of passion?

Anton Gunter



Howzit. It's already November and the nights are drawing in and getting longer. So I thought we would address the elephant in the room: hypocrisy and the failings that multiple governments have pushed onto the transport industry.

It all starts with the Department of Transport and the position of transport secretary – with every single Prime Minister known to man not employing anybody who could do the job or understand the demands of transport and logistics.

Now I don't want to try to paint logistics as one of the key sciences, but it does demand more respect than any government has given it. If we look at history, it was only in 2002 that we got a secretary of state for transport who stood alone in that role.

Before that we had 'two Jags' John Prescott as secretary of state for environment, transport, and the regions, and then it was

deemed that the role should not only change in nature, but also change in name. Thus the secretary of state for transport, local government and the regions was born.

Thankfully it was recognised that transport was indeed important enough to stand on its own, and in 2002 we finally got a fully-fledged transport secretary.

But look at those who have served in the role, with no experience or indeed passion for logistics – and more specifically transport. The transport secretary's role is varied and ranges from making policy on greener transport to overseeing policy on ports, road freight and even dabbles in airfreight.

So why is there never anyone with experience placed in this position? Or indeed someone with passion and a desire to make transport better in the UK?

The current transport secretary nearly got rid of a large amount of much-needed investment into one of Britain's largest ports by comments they made. Have they ever used a shipping port, been to see the border crossing at Dover, or indeed wandered over to Heathrow and seen how we can maybe grow our central aviation hub to make Britain a leader of transport, instead of accepting more than £68,500 in donations, gifts and hospitality in the last year?

Can we also ever forget the previous transport secretary, who later became secretary of state for defence. Oh yes, a famous large ferry company decided to get rid of staff in a very unscrupulous manner and that led to a standoff with the Government.

The then secretary threatened to boycott and take action – yet despite huffing and puffing and desperately trying to blow down the ferry company, nothing happened.

I understand that we are run by a group of career politicians who are placed in favourable positions by their leaders because they voted for or supported them in a specific way... but come on!

I'm passionate about transport. I like to think I take interest in what is causing issues around the UK to give my customers the best support. We worked through Brexit, despite the Government having no clue about what was coming and simply instructing companies to have an Economic Operators Registration and Identification (EORI) number. Well done Number 10 – such great advice.

And where was the transport secretary when there was a shortage of drivers, when the lines of traffic to Dover were snaking back for miles, when there were delays at ports due to system failures, or during Covid when shipping lines were pushing prices through the roof?

Where were they when a vessel got stuck in the Suez Canal or when shipping lines started to have to go around the Cape, at great expense and inconvenience?

It's time my industry was taken seriously, because if you look around your home and office, everything that you have has required some form of transport to get it to where it needs to be.

If we are all brutally honest, the transport secretary's department is one of the most important in Government.

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

Lack of soft skills is a real concern

By Adam Pringle

By the end of this decade, 30% of the Shropshire workforce will belong to Generation Z.

These people, who were born between 1997 and 2012, will be driving vast cultural shifts and changes to how work is approached.

Aspects of the day-to-day workplace which older colleagues may take for granted – like verbal communication skills, face-to-face business networking, and cold-calling – could be a thing of the past.

New research suggests that Gen Z workers in our county struggle with communication skills (37%), resilience (28%), and problem solving (27%), and a quarter will do everything they can to avoid having to make a phone call.

Experts believe the next generation lacks these soft skills because their education has focused too heavily on developing hard skills and job-related competencies, rather than nurturing all-rounded and workplace adept professionals.

Recruitment remains a major issue for many Shropshire businesses, and the lack of these so-called 'soft skills' among potential recruits is one of the recurring challenges which employers say they face.

It's one of many key issues which projects such as the Local Skills Improvement Plan for the Marches is seeking to tackle, collaborating with



Experts believe the next generation's education has focused too heavily on developing hard skills

employers and training providers. But that's not the only challenge.

New research from The Global Payroll Association reveals that the vast majority of people are now working from home for all, or some, of the working week – and while there is confidence that productivity isn't being negatively impacted, it seems workplace culture and the use of soft skills might be suffering.

Chief executive Melanie Pizzey says: "It's clear that the social element of the workplace

is starting to become extinct and this is extremely important, both when it comes to internal bonding within the workforce, as well as nurturing those all important external relationships that can be so important in getting deals over the line.

"Unfortunately, many employers feel as though they need to keep an element of flexible working in order to keep with the times, but in some industries this simply isn't sensible and doing so could do more harm than good."

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Hospitality industry warned over new tips and gratuities legislation



Shropshire is well known for its thriving tourism and leisure industry, however recent legislative changes mean that businesses in the sector need to be aware of changes to the law on tips and gratuities which came into force on October 1 – or face the possibility of employment tribunals.

The new legislation makes it unlawful for employers to withhold tips and service charges from staff, and means that more than two million workers will have their tips protected.

These new rules require 100% of the tips generated at a place of work to be passed to employees in a fair and transparent manner.

The legislation follows a lengthy consultation process during which it was revealed that an estimated £200 million was being held back from staff by companies withholding tips.

As a minimum, employers must now:

- Allocate tips fairly and transparently
- Have a written policy on how tips are allocated to workers
- Distribute 100% of tips to workers by the end of the month following which they were received

Lee Stott, Employment Tax Partner at UK top ten accountancy firm Azets, said: “Employers must review their current arrangements for administering tips and ascertain what needs to be done to ensure compliancy with this new legislation.

“There is absolutely no time to lose; the new rules came into force on October 1 and no transition period has been built into the legislation.

“If a worker raises a concern that the allocation of tips and gratuities is not fair or feels that they are being discriminated against, whether deliberate or not, they are able to raise a claim with the employment tribunal which, if successful, could result in compensation payable of up to £5,000.

“As this new legislation falls within employment law legislation, the risk will solely sit with the employer. This risk cannot be discharged to a third party such as a troncmaster – someone appointed by a business to be responsible for sharing tips to staff via a tronc scheme.

“Our advice to businesses is to seek professional help to understand and act upon the new legislation, host employee consultations, identify potential risks and to implement a tronc scheme.”

Such a scheme – the word originating from ‘tronc des pauvres’ (collecting boxes for the poor) in 1920s France – is a pay arrangement which allows hospitality and leisure businesses to fairly share tips and service charges given by customers to staff.

If an employer decides how tips are allocated, the payment of them is subject to both PAYE and Class 1 National Insurance Contributions (NICs).

When an independent troncmaster is appointed to decide how any tips and gratuities are distributed and to manage the allocation and payment of those tips, they are not considered earnings for NICs purposes and therefore only attract PAYE.

Therefore, appointing a troncmaster can provide savings of both primary and secondary NICs.

Lee added: “Appointing a troncmaster does not remove the obligation on the employer to ensure that the method of distribution is fair and reasonable - as required by the new rules.

“There is a fine line between the employer directing how tips are allocated, which would jeopardise the NICs advantages, and ensuring the method of allocation applied by the troncmaster is fair and reasonable.”



Lee Stott



Francesca Hutcheson

• Lee Stott and Francesca Hutcheson, tax partner from Azets’ Shrewsbury office, are on hand to support compliance with the new rules and to advise on the likely tax treatment of tips and gratuities for any impacted businesses.



Prizes beckon at awards ceremony

A Shropshire law firm is celebrating after being shortlisted in two categories at the national Personal Injury Awards.

The awards recognise the excellence of law firms and individuals across the personal injury and medical negligence sectors, and Shrewsbury-based Lanyon Bowdler has been shortlisted in the Claimant Team of the Year and Outstanding Case of the Year categories.

Winners will be announced at a gala evening in Manchester on November 28.

Lucy Small, acting head of Lanyon Bowdler’s medical negligence team, said: “It is a particularly pleasing achievement because the judging process is always extremely thorough.

“Our medical negligence team

works tirelessly on behalf of our clients and fully deserves to be recognised on the national stage with this shortlisting.”

Dawn Humphries, head of Lanyon Bowdler’s personal injury team, added: “To be nominated in two categories at the awards is a great achievement.

“The award judges look for team collaboration and coordination leading to the best possible outcomes and wins for clients, and a heightened understanding of, and demonstrable commitment to, the needs of catastrophically injured clients and their families.

“Catastrophic injuries are life-changing; they include devastating brain injuries, amputations and spinal cord injuries.

“Achieving the maximum level of compensation is vital to ensure day-to-day needs are met both now and particularly in the future.”

Off-grid superfast charging



The charging station which has been set up at Wrekin Retail Park

EV-OG chief executive Jonathan Morgan

Electric charging business EV-OG has chosen Telford for the launch of its first off-grid superfast electric vehicle charger.

The unit, which will not drain power from the National Grid, has been fitted at Wrekin Retail Park.

Unlike traditional chargers, EV-OG’s solution is entirely off-grid, utilising recycled fuels and renewable energy sources to ensure both speed and sustainability.

Chief executive Jonathan Morgan said: “We chose Telford for several reasons, one being the area is heavily residential with a large retail draw.

“The site itself is also a flagship one for us. The landlord came to us as they had struggled to get any EV supply there due to the grid connection and restrictions on cost.”



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COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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- An attractive part listed property dating back to 15th century
- Until recently traded as a restaurant and licenced entertainment venue
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An artist's impression of how the site will look at night

New film studio to bring variety of opportunities

Lights, camera, action . . . plans have been revealed to open a new film studio in a vacant 60,000 sq ft warehouse in Telford.

First Central Studios is being spearheaded by London-based independent film production company AIB LIVE.

The project to convert the Hortonwood site is set to begin over the next few weeks, with a view to the studio complex being fully open by Spring next year.

The studios are being designed by Midlands-based BHB Architects, which has worked on a series of other high-profile commercial developments for clients such as JCB.

The facility is planned to contain four sound stages spanning over 40,000 sq ft, plus workshops, production offices, dressing rooms, and make-up rooms with all necessary support facilities.

AIB LIVE said: "The British film and TV industry stands as one of this country's great

ongoing success stories and we are committed to building the creative sector in the West Midlands with First Central Studios and promote the stunning locations that are readily available in this region – many of which have never been shown on the big screen."

One of the key mandates for First Central Studios is to support young talent into the film industry through a creation of a film academy, and the team has already held exploratory discussions with local educational institutions such as Telford College, with a focus on accessibility and diversity.

The news has been welcomed by Invest Telford, the town's inward investment arm, which said: "We are delighted that AIB Live has chosen Telford as a destination to establish the first film and television studio in the West Midlands.

"This investment reflects Telford's potential as a prime location for the booming film industry and addresses the growing demand for sought-after film locations. In addition to the film studio, it creates educational and training

opportunities for the borough's emerging talent."

Apart from hiring out the studios to other production companies, streamers and independent producers, AIB LIVE will also create and shoot its own productions from the studios.

The first production is due to be a comedy thriller called "The Ghost Train" directed by award-winning Italian director Frankie Caradonna. Filming is due to start in January, and will involve the Severn Valley Railway.

The official announcement of First Central Studios took place at The Astbury Golf Resort near Bridgnorth where the reception was attended by high profile guests including civic leaders, Create Central, Telford College, senior film industry professionals, and directors of Severn Valley Railway.

The event also gave a platform to Shropshire-based independent production company Rocking Horse Media which is currently promoting its new comedy drama 'Henry House', written and directed by Gareth Thomas and starring Orla Jones.

It's record growth in firm's 50th year



Adam Fecher, Paul Fecher, Marc Fecher, and Paul King at the opening

Northwood – the Telford-based manufacturer of professional paper hygiene and wiping products – is celebrating its 50th year with record growth and a £750,000 investment in new office space.

The company has seen turnover increase from £236 million to £493 million in the last five years.

To mark its golden anniversary, the family-run business has bought

a 16,850 sq ft building which has been converted into its new corporate head office. Chairman Paul Fecher, who performed the opening, said: "I am delighted to see our business investing and working hard to secure a strong future, while also helping to boost the local economy."

A total of 50 people are based at Northwood's new office at Stafford Park, and the company is currently recruiting for a number of roles.

County company strikes collaboration deal in US

A Shropshire firm is one of only 30 UK companies invited to take part in a ground-breaking collaboration aimed at increasing trade and economic co-operation with Florida.

Serchem, based in Telford, attended the Department for Business and Trade-led UK-Florida Trade Corridor Programme roadshow, seeking to strengthen ties between the UK and Florida's dynamic life sciences industry.

Serchem is a global leader in the development and manufacturing of hygiene and decontamination products, working with both NHS and private health providers around the world.

Oliver Wadlow, director of Serchem, said: "The roadshow that took in Miami, Orlando and Tampa was an exceptional experience that could open up many opportunities for businesses on both sides of the pond.


"Significant strides were made during the week in Florida to strengthen ties and make new contacts. We visited Nemours Children's Hospital in Orlando, and the Orlando Health, Heart, and Vascular Institute.

"A key trip to Tampa included the Center for Advanced Medical Learning and Stimulation, and a range of discussions, presentations and pitches centred on healthcare, education and procurement.

"On our drive to Miami, we stopped off in Jupiter for a presentation and tour at the Max Planck Florida Institute for Neuroscience before visiting the nearby Scripps Institute. The itinerary in Miami included a visit to Converge Miami – a hub for science, tech and innovation.

"The UK is currently one of the top foreign investors in Florida and the state supplies us with a wide range of products. It is pleasing to know that the spirit of co-operation and development between us is still important and that the trade corridor programme has also opened up exciting possibilities for us at Serchem."

A key trip to Tampa included the Center for Advanced Medical Learning and Stimulation, and a range of discussions, presentations and pitches centred on healthcare, education and procurement.




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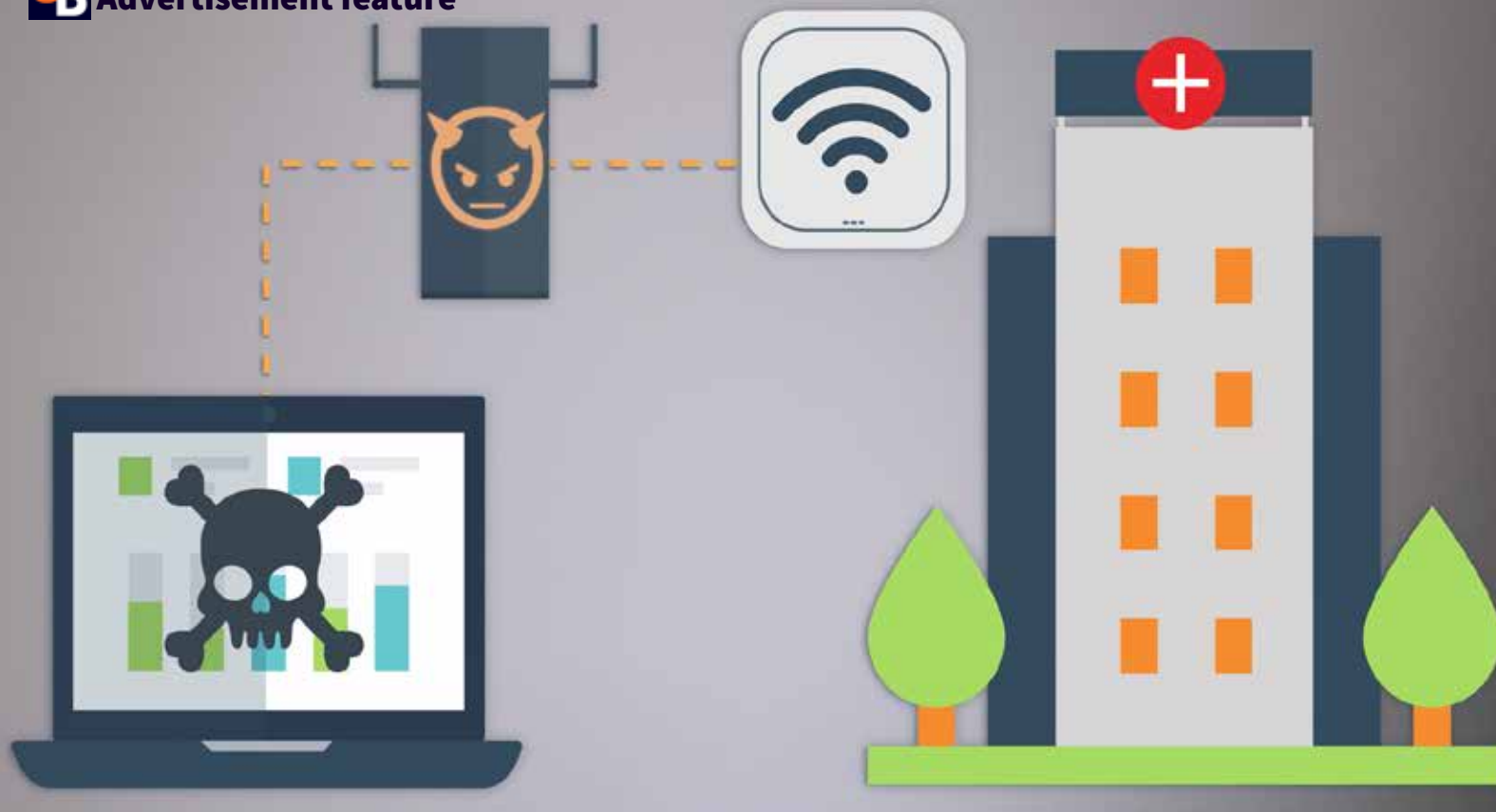
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Keeping safe while using public Wi-Fi

Joe Newton



During my summer holiday, I was reminded of the importance of being cautious when using public Wi-Fi. The resort where we stayed offered free public Wi-Fi to all guests, but there were a couple of warning signs that it might not be safe:

Network Name (SSID)

The network was simply named "Guest," which makes it vulnerable to a "Rogue Access Point" being set up within the resort. This could trick unsuspecting guests into connecting to a malicious network instead of the legitimate one. An Access Point is a device that transmits a wireless signal, and a rogue access point is one that is unauthorized. This could be an innocent mistake, like a guest using their phone's hotspot, or it could be

a deliberate attempt by a bad actor to lure guests onto their network to attack connected devices. The problem with the name "Guest" is that it makes it easy for a rogue access point to appear legitimate. Always ensure you connect to the correct network when using public Wi-Fi.

No Password Protection

The network had no password, which is common and makes it easier for guests to connect. However, no password means no encryption. Many people think a password on a wireless network is just to keep unauthorized users out, but it also encrypts your data. When you connect to a network with a cable, your data is generally safe within the local network unless someone interferes with the devices or cables. However, with Wi-Fi, your data is sent via radio waves that can be intercepted by anyone with the right equipment. The only way to keep your data safe is to encrypt it. Using a password to connect to a wireless network employs WPA2 or WPA3 (Wi-Fi Protected Access) technology to encrypt your data. If you connect to a public Wi-Fi network without a password, always use a VPN to encrypt the traffic to and from your device.

A VPN (Virtual Private Network) is traditionally used to securely access data stored at your office while working remotely. It works by creating an encrypted "tunnel" over the internet between two devices, such as your office router and your laptop. All traffic is sent through this tunnel, making it safe to transfer sensitive data as if you were on the

same private network as your office server. This encryption also protects any data you send on a public network.

Commercial VPN services now primarily aim to encrypt your traffic on untrusted networks. Your traffic is sent to the VPN provider's server over a VPN tunnel, and you then access the internet from their server.

If you don't have a company VPN, there are free options like Microsoft Defender, which are usually limited to a certain amount of data, or you can subscribe to a commercial service like NordVPN.

If you offer your customers public Wi-Fi access, speak to Connexis today on how you can improve your security. Call 01952528000 or email sales@connexis.co.uk



connexis

Joe Newton is Technical Director at Connexis, based in Telford

£30 million investment secured to fund growth of law firm

Law firm FBC Manby Bowdler has secured a £30 million investment to fund ambitious plans to double its size in the next 18 months.

The move follows a period of sustained growth for the firm, which has four Shropshire bases - in Shrewsbury, Telford, Bridgnorth and Church Stretton.

Turnover has topped £16 million in the last

year and is growing at over 10% per year. The £30 million investment from Horizon Capital will fuel the expansion, which includes the creation of approximately 20 new jobs and the opening of a new office in Knowle, near Solihull.

Chief executive Neil Lloyd said: "We're really excited about this investment which

not only allows us to maintain our impressive growth trajectory but also creates exciting opportunities for our people and our clients.

"We will be broadening our range of services and this allows us to create centres of expertise across our expanded network. FBC Manby Bowdler will be the founding firm of Horizon Capital's new Adeptio Law Group."

Business as usual for transport company under new ownership

A Shropshire-based public transport company with a fleet of nearly 150 buses and coaches is under new ownership.

FirstGroup plc has announced the acquisition of the Lakeside Group, which has its headquarters on Ellesmere Business Park, and other sites including Shrewsbury and Telford.

The group runs a number of well-recognised local brands such as Lakeside Coaches, Merediths Coaches and A.T. Brown.

Graham Sutherland, FirstGroup chief executive, said: "The acquisition of Lakeside, a profitable business with excellent growth potential, builds on our recent acquisitions in First Bus.

"The addition to our portfolio will not only grow our position in adjacent services, but it will also allow us to enter new regions which is key to the overall strategy."

The company said it would be 'business as usual' for Lakeside customers. The value of the takeover deal has not been disclosed.

The majority of Lakeside's revenue comes from school and private hire contracts, with the remaining income from tours, a small local bus operation under contract to Shropshire Council, and business-to-business operations.

The business has grown significantly over recent years and retained strong levels of profitability.

For the year ended 31 March 2024, Lakeside delivered revenues of around £12.5 million and earnings before interest and taxes of £2.5 million.

Neal Hall, managing director of Lakeside, will continue to manage the business on a day-to-day basis going forward.

Gareth Davies, the owner of Lakeside, will continue to lead the business and will join First Bus to support the ongoing development of its wider coaching strategy.

The acquisition of Lakeside Group is the latest in a series of deals by the FTSE 250 listed transport business which has been looking to grow and diversify its bus division, which now brings in around £100 million a year.



Andrew Bailey, centre with Mark Thompson and Richard Partington during the visit to AceOn's base at Stafford Park

Humanitarian project for Ukraine is outlined in visit

The Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, learned about a new humanitarian project for the people of Ukraine during a visit to Telford-based battery specialist AceOn to.

Project Mettle is an ambitious two-year programme to provide zero-emission power

solutions, supporting humanitarian efforts in collaboration with the Ukrainian Red Cross.

The Governor said: "This is real innovation here at AceOn.

"It's inspiring to see businesses like this leading the way, and it offers important lessons for the policies we shape nationally."

Raising a glass to our vineyards

Vineyards are springing up all over the country with a growth in popularity of English wines . . . and Shropshire is no exception. HENRY CARPENTER reports.

What is it about Shropshire and vineyards?

The rise and rise of English wines over the last couple of decades has been well documented, and the shelves of supermarkets and wine merchants invariably stock wines – some sparkling – from these shores.

Viticulture is now the fastest-growing agricultural sector, with consumers increasingly seeking locally produced and environmentally friendly wines.

And very well received they are too. The days of English wines being a bit of a joke – or at least a poor imitation of their counterparts from traditional wine-making hotbeds like France, Spain and Italy – are firmly rooted in the past.

Traditionally the concentration of vineyards in the UK is in a band covering the southern counties, stretching from Kent through Sussex and Hampshire, though Dorset and the West Country.

But there are over 1,000 vineyards and some 200 wineries stretching right up into Yorkshire and Scotland.

So there's no reason why Shropshire should be any different – and it isn't. There are several vineyards dotted across the country, varying hugely in size and character. The likes of Hencote, Wroxeter and Rowton are in or close to Shrewsbury, while Colemere is a stone's throw from Ellesmere and Mowbray Hill is in the south of the county near Church Stretton.

Possibly the most remote – at least in terms of distance from major towns and road networks – is Kerry Vale Vineyard. It might be small but it is also beautiful – literally, in that it straddles the picturesque Welsh border near Church Stoke, and also in terms of its success.

It is a family-run business owned by husband-and-wife team, Russell and Janet Cooke, who relocated from the US four years ago to be closer to their grandchildren.

"When they saw the vineyard for sale, they thought it was a lifestyle business they could both get involved in," explains Nadine Roach, head of marketing and a key member of the team at Kerry Vale.

"Jan was a keen baker and so excited about developing the cafe, while Russ was interested in the vines. The vineyard house meant they could live and work on site, so it was a perfect relocation opportunity."



Nadine Roach leading a vineyard tour



Russell Cooke collects the fruit



The visitor centre at Kerry Vale Vineyard near Church Stoke

So In February 2020 they purchased the vineyard from the Ferguson family who founded it 10 years earlier.

Although new to the industry when they took on Kerry Vale, the Cookes' careers had often led them to wine-making regions. Russell fondly recalls living in Vienna, rich in vineyards yet rarely exporting its wine, and their aim was to replicate the Viennese 'Heuriger' culture in Shropshire, where family and friends enjoy local wine with simple local food.

Kerry Vale Vineyard is home to 6,500 vines of four varieties – Rondo, Pinot Noir, Phoenix, and Solaris – which, we are told, are perfectly suited to the English climate. This diversity allows the team at Kerry Vale to produce red, white, and rosé still wines, as well as traditional method sparkling wine. I wonder what makes the site conducive to growing grapes?

Nadine explains that the soil at Kerry Vale

plays a vital role in viticulture, influencing grapevine growth and fruit quality.

"The well-draining soil prevents waterlogging, protecting grapevines' roots," she says.

"With a pH of 6.5 (6-7 is ideal for grape vines) and high nutrient content, including good levels of magnesium, potassium, and phosphorus, our soil supports robust vine growth. We analyse the soil's health every few years and replenish nutrients as needed. The stoney, free-draining texture also provides ideal conditions for grape cultivation."

Kerry Vale is more of a boutique vineyard than a mass producer, as reflected by its output.

Nadine continues: "Our best vintage to date was 2018, with near-perfect growing conditions yielding 18,000 bottles.

"In contrast, a late frost in 2020 drastically



Kerry Vale wines produced in Shropshire



Yes, it could be assumed this is an image from rural France – Kerry Vale, near Church Stoke



The shop at Halfpenny Green, situated on the Staffordshire border at Claverley



An aerial view of the Halfpenny Green site

reduced our crop, resulting in only 1,000 bottles. On average, we aim to produce around 10,000 bottles of wine annually."

In many ways, Kerry Vale is located in an area that time forgot. As well as the peace and tranquillity of this sparsely populated part of the world, it sits on land of great archaeological interest. Once part of the ancient Roman site of Pentreheyling Fort, it also hosted Bronze Age funerary monuments, a druid road, and a medieval settlement. Offa's Dyke is just a field away.

Which is all great – but if the wines don't sell there's no business.

As Nadine says: "Our dedication to excellence has earned us over 50 national and international awards for our wines, featured in prestigious venues like the Houses of Parliament and recognised by media such as BBC Midlands Today and S4C.



A selection of wines from Halfpenny Green

"We proudly supply AA Rosette-winning and Michelin guide restaurants and consistently earn TripAdvisor's Certificate of Excellence and Travelers' Choice Award. In our recent Visitor Attraction Quality Scheme, we received a tour score of 100%."

As with all agricultural disciplines, the fortunes of grape growers lie heavily in what the weather decides to do in any given year.

"Poor weather poses the biggest threat to our vineyard," confirms Nadine. "Persistent wet weather this year has caused heavy crop losses, with many winemakers reporting harvests down by 20% to 70%."

"Fortunately, excess stock from last year's bumper crop helps meet demand. Reserve wines are crucial in adapting to tough years. The UK wine industry also faces challenges with impending alcohol duty regulation changes,

as we already pay higher duty rates than our European counterparts – one of the major cost factors affecting English wine."

No wonder then that vineyard owners such as the Cookes have looked to add to their facilities on site in a bid to attract the paying public.

There is a custom-built visitor centre with a café and shop which is open Tuesday to Sunday from February to Christmas, and the team run tours three days a week from May to September.

There is also a schedule of craft workshops, the opportunity to host private functions in the vineyard's tasting room as well as lay on private tours.

Almost diametrically opposite Kerry Vale on the other side of the county is Halfpenny Green Wine Estate. It is also a very different concern in terms of size and age.

Sitting on the border of Staffordshire near Claverley, the vineyard – which now extends over 30 acres – is another family affair. It was the vision of farmer Martin Vickers 34 years ago to plant a vineyard that would one day match continental sites.

Today, the vines are managed by Martin and produce award-winning wines crafted by his son Clive. The shop, restaurant and tea rooms are run by Clive's wife Lisa.

The estate is situated 250ft above sea level and the vines are comprised of 16 different varieties, each producing a different grape. The estate's winery was built in 2005 and produces up to 60,000 bottles of own-label wine each year, all made using grapes grown on site.

"Familiar varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir feature prominently, and are used in producing our award-winning sparkling wines, amongst others," says the family.

"Due to the cooler climate, a variety of weather-hardy grapes are also grown throughout the site, including varieties such as Bacchus, Huxelrebe, Madeleine Angevine, Regent, Rondo and Schönburger.

"This means that, even with the great British weather, the vines still have good yield and produce high quality grapes."

The winery also carries out contract winemaking and bottling for over 80 other vineyards around England and Wales.

Halfpenny Green has grown into a multi-faceted visitor complex, with a sizeable delicatessen, a thriving restaurant, a craft village and even a zoological park on site.

"This was born out of a dream to educate the public about different animals, poke holes in common misconceptions and to remove stigmas commonly associated with animals that aren't so cute and fluffy," says the Vickers.

But at the likes of Halfpenny Green, Kerry Vale, Hencote and the rest, it is largely about the wines.

With the number of vineyards, and therefore competition, on the rise, and the weather evermore precarious due to climate change, do the vineyard owners of Shropshire look to the future with confidence?

As Nadine says: "Shropshire's passionate community of growers and winemakers are producing world-class wines.

"We feel fortunate to be part of this thriving network of like-minded individuals, all working together to grow the sector."

What is your data strategy? Make sure you don't get left behind!



Hollie Whittles

Data is now the most valuable commodity in the world, surpassing oil in terms of worth. Just like oil, data needs to be extracted, refined and distributed properly, but unlike oil, it is limitless and can be used in creative ways to drive value in a business.

A whopping 76% of business are using data as an integral part of their business strategy and are experiencing benefits such as increased security and greater agility, with every successful company leveraging data as an asset.

Data is a key business asset. It powers innovation, optimisation and digital transformation; firms that have made the shift have been enjoying decreased risk, increased efficiency and have driven growth, using tools such as advanced analytics, reporting and business modelling.

But that still means a significant 24% are not taking advantage of the benefits that a data strategy can bring, and run the risk of being left behind. Businesses that do not use their data will struggle to compete and innovate.

One multinational manufacturing client saved significant money after investing in a data strategy. In the first month the company

discovered that two departments were buying the same products from the same company at different prices. Analysing the data helped them renegotiate the deal and save £2 million from their bottom line.

People drive data

After data, people are the second most valuable assets. While data is a powerful asset, it is only as useful as the people who understand and use it. Data is like the oil, but your people are the engine that make it work.

It is important to empower those employees and make sure they have the right tools to use the data correctly.

The question many ask is how to build that data-driven culture. It is important to empower employees with the right tools and the right training to interpret that data. A data-driven culture is not just about tech, but about mindset, habits and skills. It starts from the top down, from the executive level C-suite, but it must propagate to every corner of a business.

Collaboration between data departments in every business is key; data needs to be actionable.

Be sure to democratise data across the whole organisation and make it accessible to everyone. An effective data strategy gives people the information they need to make better decisions faster. It empowers your employees to take action.

Harness the power of AI

It is hard to ignore the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on a data strategy. We are moving away from reporting to predictive and prescriptive analytics that can help businesses predict future outcomes.

It is an evolution from scripted analytics (i.e. what happened last week?) to predictive (what is going to happen and how much will I sell?) And on to prescriptive, what should I do about it?

AI and machine learning can help business

not only analyse the past but also predict future business outcomes. AI can help optimise operations from predictive maintenance in manufacturing to personalised marketing in retail. It can assess when things do not look right and predict future failure. It is much cheaper to fix something before it breaks, than risk losing stock and experiencing downtime in your business.

Machine learning is becoming more prevalent in spotting patterns and trends that are invisible to human analysts, using algorithms that are far too complex for human beings to spot. If you can predict the future then you get competitive advantage.

So how can businesses leverage AI?

Machine learning

- Client insights and predictive analytics
- Capacity planning and resource optimisation
- Predictive maintenance and monitoring

Chatbots

- Website 'Frequently Asked Questions'
- 24/7 customer support
- Personalised recommendations

Marketing tools

- ChatGPT – for research and text content generation
- DALL.E – for social media image creation
- Sora – for marketing video creation

Think about your business strategy and integrate data.

Every business needs a business strategy, from business development to customer experience, so why not harness data and integrate data into your strategy to gain insights on everything from product development to customer experience?

Start small but aim big and get good advice. Do not try to do everything at once. If you fix lots of small things your business will evolve naturally.

The future belongs to businesses that can harness the power of data.



Jesmonite celebrate their success

Celebrating a British win for manufacturer

● Bishop's Castle manufacturer Jesmonite has won the Global Britain Business of the Year prize at the British Chambers of Commerce Business Awards. It celebrates businesses that have achieved significant and sustained international growth and who have shown resilience and adaptability in a competitive global marketplace. Jesmonite's eco-friendly composite materials provide sustainable alternatives for a variety of industries, including construction, art, and design.

● *Reconomy, the Telford-based international circular economy specialist, has been named in the UBS-sponsored UK Fast Growth Index 2024, which celebrates the fastest-growing businesses across the country. Among the top 350 businesses nationwide, Reconomy also secured a place in the top 50 for the Midlands. The Index showcases companies driving innovation, creating jobs, and boosting economic development. Collectively, the businesses on this year's list generate over £12 billion in turnover.*

● A row of eco houses in Shropshire have been added to a national network of low carbon homes thanks to their energy efficiency credentials. The homes in Village Road, Norton, are the latest to be added to the Green Open Homes scheme – which means they will open their doors to showcase the latest green technology and residents will answer questions from visitors. The homes were constructed by Apley Estate.

● *Midlands Air Ambulance Charity is offering a practical first aid course specifically designed for motorcyclists called 'First Biker on Scene'. Created and delivered by experts in pre-hospital care who are experienced bikers themselves, it offers valuable real world insights and hands-on training. The three-hour course is being held at the charity's airbase and headquarters near Shifnal.*

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Hollie Whittles is a director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford

Under new ownership

The Shrewsbury Club is under new ownership, after being taken over by Europe's largest health, fitness and wellness group.

David Lloyd Clubs has bought the Sundorne site from The Mosaic Group for an undisclosed sum, and says it has plans to invest in redeveloping the site next year, taking facilities to 'the next level'.

Dave Courteen, managing director of The Mosaic Group which bought the club out of administration 13 years ago, said it had not been an easy decision to sell.

"The Shrewsbury Club has been a big part of my life, and I've loved every moment of my involvement here over the last 13 years. But as a group we believe this decision is in the best interests of the club, and so it's the right one."

"We'll look back with pride that we took the club on when it was in administration, with fewer than 2,000 members and not the best reputation in the town, and we are handing it on as a flourishing business with 6,000 members, significantly-enhanced facilities, and - we believe - a reputation as a valuable asset to life in Shrewsbury."

Under Dave's stewardship, it has also become home to some of the highest level tennis in the UK over the past few years, hosting the prestigious ITF World Tour W100 competition and bringing a big tourism income boost to



Dave Courteen



The Shrewsbury Club

Shropshire. The Shrewsbury Club's existing 65 employees join David Lloyd Clubs' 11,000-plus team members across the UK and mainland Europe.

Stuart Caswell, property director at David Lloyd, said: "We're delighted to welcome The Shrewsbury Club and all its members. It's already a thriving community with a fantastic range of facilities, and we look forward to investing further into the club, helping local residents in Shrewsbury and the surrounding area to enjoy happier, healthier lives."

"David Lloyd Clubs is passionate about making its clubs a comfortable and welcoming place for members to come together with friends and family to promote physical and mental health and wellness."

"Family sits at the heart of David Lloyd Clubs and the proposed investment plans will enhance the facilities within the club for the existing 6,000 members and new individuals and families."

He said the company would be looking to 'explore opportunities to develop local community partnerships'.

Upskill your workforce to university level for free



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HTQ's include qualifications such as Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas that have been adapted to ensure that learners gain the skills that employers need for particular specialist roles and are designed for modular and flexible study.

Free university level training

Funding from the government means we can currently offer pairs of units from these HTQ's for free. This modular approach allows employers wanting to upskill their workforce in specific topics, the opportunity to access this without having to embark on a full qualification. Funding is also available to individuals who can demonstrate that these courses will advance their careers.

Flexible training in the following subject areas is available in January / February 2025:

- Engineering
- Health
- Digital
- Computing

Access to University

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Morris Property umbrellas paying tribute to Robin's three decades with the business Robin at the surprise gathering chatting with Pete Roach

Surprise celebrations for 30th anniversary

Colleagues from Morris Property and across the Morris company gathered for a surprise get together to celebrate chairman Robin Morris's 30th work anniversary at the family-run fifth generation business.

Fellow director and brother, Chris Morris, kicked off proceedings with a speech and presentation revealing a short film charting milestone events for each of Robin's 30 years at the family business.

Over the period, Morris Property has made a significant contribution to the local built environment in particular through growth of its contracting business, in addition to its own investments – the largest of which is the current Stadium Point development at Oteley Road in Shrewsbury.

Chris added that since Robin joined the company in 1994, there had been many other significant business developments and standout moments as well as a few challenges outside the company's control – not least the massive gas explosion opposite the Morris Welsh Bridge offices in 2009, just as Robin had taken over as chairman from his father Bill.

Following presentation of a commemorative picture and gift, the event was topped off by a huge celebration cake which Robin officially cut to share with over 50 of his colleagues and family attending. The final surprise came in the form of a large Morris Property 30 choreographed outside by members of the team.

Robin reflected on the event: "What a wonderful surprise to have so many colleagues join me to celebrate my 30-year anniversary with the company.

"I really liked the short film the marketing team had put together – it reminded me just



Three generations of Morris family members – Chris, Robin, Guy and Bill celebrate with a toast



Robin and guests watch a commemorative film how much has happened in our family business since I joined back in 1994 – and importantly just how much I enjoy working with the great teams we have here across the business.



The event was a wonderful surprise for Robin "I'm grateful to all those who celebrated with me and to those in the past who have played an important role in helping us shape the forward-thinking Morris & Company of today."

GROWING A 155 YEAR OLD SHROPSHIRE FAMILY BUSINESS

Robin, a Chartered Surveyor, armed with ten years' London commercial property experience, arrived in 1994 to join the company, heralding the fifth generation to lead the story forward.



Robin Morris joins Morris & Company in 1994

Visionary

As a strategic thinker, Robin was instrumental in devising the concept of Shrewsbury's West End with its designated leisure quarter. This required not only substantial investment in Morris's own existing stock, but an appetite to create exciting new buildings and public space and to work collaboratively with others. Through the regeneration of Victoria Quay Robin has helped transform the townscape, with cutting edge design at Cirrus House to the destination restoration of the Armoury.

New Ventures

Speculatively buying 20 acres at Battlefield back in 2007, Robin's vision was to create a high design trade park with the advantages of edge-of-town location, storage and access to the arterial road network. 70 units later, Vanguard is today widely regarded as the county's most successful trade park.

The same success was achieved at Abbey Lawn office park in 2006 when a former industrial site was

transformed into an office park which has become one of the most sought-after office destinations.

This January saw the green light to develop 28 acres at Oteley Road, south Shrewsbury at Stadium Point. It took a long-term perspective and a rock solid reputation to buy the land and gain funding in a tough economic market, and speculatively build out what is the company's largest development site.

Robin is interested in wider market context, learning and taking inspiration from world leading businesses, attending and presenting for example at the world's largest property show MIPIM in Cannes.

In 2021 Robin saw the opportunity post-Covid to develop specifically for the staycation market, creating holiday properties at Marrington in south Shropshire where the business had agricultural land and property investments. In under three years, the Marrington Escapes brand now attracts over 250 bookings a year, has won a Tourism Award and been lauded across national media.

Divest to re-invest

The company's divestment of its long-standing food retailing division in 2000 to the Coop, was a crucially important move for the business, allowing reinvestment in new market sectors and expanding trading opportunities.

In 2006 the business purchased a site machinery

business which became the UK's largest manufacturer and exporter of lighting towers overseas, sold at maturation to its biggest customer John F Hunt in 2022.

Having invested in its Morris Care brand for over 34 years, it was Robin calling time with the opportune sale of this business last year in 2023 that is allowing the company to accelerate reinvestment in other new ventures.

Community

Under Robin's tenure, being integral to the Shrewsbury business community has remained important. This has ranged from the Company's millennium pontoon project

for the town, restoring riverboats to the Severn, to championing The BID and helping develop The Big Town Plan. In 2019 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Chester acknowledging his support of Shrewsbury's development and the town's first University college. That same year Morris's were awarded 'Family Business of the Year' in the West Midlands Business Masters Award.

It's a heady combination - 155 years of successful trading heritage with futuristic thinking. It takes a respect for the past blended with real ambition for innovative growth to make it work. Robin has both in spades.



Robin today with Morris Property Site Manager, Pete Allworth at Stadium Point

Ruth Ross



As the Shropshire business community continues to digest the implications of Labour's first Budget, we reflect on what has been another rollercoaster year for our economy.

It's true to say that business confidence has been rising steadily over the past few months on the back of factors such as lower inflation – but many other indicators are still heading in the wrong direction.

For example, the latest British Chamber of Commerce recruitment outlook reveals the proportion of businesses attempting to recruit new workers has fallen to its lowest level in three years.

And the last time it was below the current level was in the second quarter of 2021 when we were still taking our first tentative steps out of the pandemic.

There are wide sectoral differences within this – transport, hospitality and construction firms maintain relatively healthy recruitment levels. By contrast, more than half of retail, professional services, marketing and communication firms are not currently hiring.

And of the businesses that have been seeking to take on new staff in the third quarter of this year, more than three quarters reported difficulties finding the right calibre of people. It's a common thread which has run through our local surveys for more than 18 months now.

The third quarter of the year also saw a slight drop in funding for workplace training, while labour costs continue to apply pressure on businesses to raise prices, particularly in the transport, construction and hospitality sectors.

So what are we to make of it all? There's clearly a level of uncertainty for business right now, and Shropshire employers are looking for a clear strategy and direction to take us into 2025.

The BCC feels more support is urgently required to help the long-term sick back into work, and a greater focus on plugging of gaps in local training provision.

Here at Shropshire Chamber, we're having regular and constructive dialogue with local training providers in our capacity as the lead organisation for the Local Skills Improvement Plan in the Marches.

Good progress has been made, and longer-term funding for Local Skills Improvement Plans would be welcome, to help more businesses provide more training for more people.



Planning ahead – the Chamber team at its latest strategy day

Reflections on a rollercoaster year



Owen Fyfield and Kelly Riedel at the Halloween-themed speed networking session during the Chamber's autumn expo

There has been a sharp fall in export business from our county this year – a picture mirrored in most parts of the UK.

SME exporters are the most likely to report decreased exports, when compared with figures before the pandemic and Brexit.

It is concerning that the general upturn in business confidence is not yet translating into a better performance on exports for smaller businesses, who are of course the lifeblood of the Shropshire economy.

Businesses want to work with Government at pace to put in place a framework that makes use of all the UK's advantages to unleash our exporting potential.

It's not all about selling overseas, though. We're working hard to put more local businesses in touch with each other to ensure

that the 'Shropshire pound' remains in the county wherever possible.

We've been running 'meet the neighbours' events in recent weeks, and supporting other initiatives such as a 'meet the buyer' showcase for the construction industry.

And of course, our regular programme of network clubs in Telford, Shrewsbury and Oswestry, and expo showcases, provide a fruitful opportunity to learn more about potential suppliers and customers on your doorstep.

Finally, I'd like to give you a date for your diary. Shropshire Chamber will be holding its annual general meeting, followed by a Christmas lunch, at Hawkstone Hall near Wem on December 6. It would be wonderful to see you there.

Ruth Ross is chief executive of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, which has bases in Telford and Shrewsbury



A full house at The Shrewsbury Club for the Business Leaders' Breakfast

Reasons to be cheerful

Around 150 business leaders gathered for Invest in Shropshire's annual Business Leaders' Breakfast event.

The event, which has taken place every year since 2017, is an opportunity to update employers on the direction of economic travel for the area.

This year's session included a report from Shropshire Council's executive director of place Mark Barrow, who said there were reasons for optimism in these challenging times.

He revealed that more new businesses were established in Shropshire during 2023 than in any previous year to date.

"A total of 3,480 new formations were registered in Shropshire during the last 12 months, an increase of 11.1% on 2022 when 3,132 were recorded. It brings the number of registered companies in the county to an all-time high of 28,037."

He also told the audience at The Shrewsbury Club that the county was well-positioned to take advantage of a burgeoning green economy.

Council chief executive Andy Begley and Mark Barrow highlighted the work of the Marches Forward Partnership – a ground-breaking collaboration between four English and Welsh councils which is seeking to create a 'package' that can be offered to the global marketplace.

Other contributions came from Ben Sykes (a partner of Faulkner Brown Architects) with an update on the latest developments at Smithfield Riverside in Shrewsbury.

Bruce Gardner of David Lloyd Clubs, which has just taken over The Shrewsbury Club, outlined some of his company's expansion and redevelopment plans for the site in the new year.

Businesses were also urged to consider becoming 'foster-friendly' by Erika Ower from the fostering and adoption team at Shropshire Council.

Leader of the council Lezley Picton closed proceedings by saying there were challenges but also 'brave, ambitious and innovative' economic development activities taking place.



Carl Jones (right) chats to Mark Barrow and Andy Begley about the Marches Forward Partnership

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The Princess talks to student Sophie McKenzie during a tour of the college's facilities



Telford College governor Chris Pallett (left) and principal Lawrence Wood show The Princess Royal round the new facilities

Royal visitor opens Quad

A new learning centre in the heart of Telford has received a royal seal of approval.

The Princess Royal performed the official opening of The Quad in the town's fast-evolving Station Quarter.

The four-storey building has been funded by the UK Government and Telford & Wrekin Council, and is a partnership between the council, Telford College, Harper Adams University, European Innovation and Invest Telford.

It is designed to spark careers in digital studies and applied sciences – and to retain, upskill and develop local talent at a time when many young people are travelling out of borough for further education. It will also provide a base for up to 120 start-up businesses.

The royal visitor, who is Chancellor of Harper Adams University, toured the facility and spoke to students before hearing from guest speaker Mo Chaudry, a former Telford College student who has become a multi-millionaire leisure industry entrepreneur.

Mo, whose family still live in Wellington, told how education was the 'lifeblood of progress', and said his story was proof that 'dreams can come true if you have the passion to believe in them'.

Councillor Lee Carter, Telford & Wrekin Council leader, said: "It's wonderful to see learners from across Telford and Wrekin already benefiting from courses at The Quad – giving them the skills and knowledge to secure future careers in different sectors."

"As well as giving learners of all ages the opportunity to study courses delivered by Telford College and Harper Adams University, the facility is also the perfect space to help businesses develop and flourish in Telford and Wrekin."

Lawrence Wood, Telford College principal and chief executive, said: "Maths and digital qualifications are a vital pathway to higher quality and better paid jobs, and having a campus in the heart of the town centre makes the college more accessible than ever."

"Our curriculum at Station Quarter is targeted towards careers in sectors such as cybersecurity, AI, virtual and augmented reality, cloud computing, wireless technologies and 5G innovation. These are skills which local employers tell us they desperately need."

Alongside the education provision from the college and university, a new business incubator on the third floor of The Quad will support new and growing companies. Start Up Telford and Innovate Telford programmes will be delivered from this space.



Mo Chaudry, Telford College alumnus and guest speaker, chatting with The Princess Royal



T-Level students Fletcher Burman and Standon Ball talk to The Princess Royal

Harper Adams vice-chancellor Professor Ken Sloan said: "We are delighted Her Royal Highness was able to join us to see the digital skills hub for herself. Now the hub is officially open, we're looking forward to a series of events to showcase it to both students and industry in the coming months."

"Our work at this hub – the first base for educational provision by Harper Adams which is not on our main campus – will take the university into the heart of Telford."

Financial support is available

Are you a Shropshire-based SME looking to diversify or expand? There could be financial support available to you.

The UKSPF Small Business Grant Scheme has reopened for applications, and offers grants of between £2,000 and £10,000 to purchase new equipment or make improvements to business premises.

One of the previous recipients is Beth Heath of Quarry Kitchen & Shropshire Ice Cream Ltd, who received a grant to help diversify into a new market.

"We had taken over the Quarry Café and wanted to transform it into a vibrant space that celebrated local food and drink. We've used the grant to renovate the café by recladding and replacing the walls."

"The result is a bright, clean, and attractive eating area that has achieved a 5-star food hygiene rating. We've also been able to employ a number of local people. None of this would have been possible without the grant."

Since March the team has received 218 Expressions of Interest with 39 projects from across Shropshire going forward to full application. To date £250,000 has been awarded to help small businesses grow and expand.

Gary Spence, Shropshire Council's external funding and technical lead officer in the business growth and investment team,



Quarry Kitchen & Shropshire Ice Cream Ltd was renovated via the grant



5-star food hygiene rating

said: "This grant continues to be popular. On each of the previous occasions we have invited applications we've been forced to close the process within a week because of the overwhelming response."

"We ask businesses to complete their Expressions of Interest (EOI) right away to avoid disappointment. We'd also like to remind potential applicants to check the criteria both in terms of their eligibility, and what can – and cannot – be funded before applying."

Businesses from one to 49 employees can apply for a grant if their business is physically located in the Shropshire Council local authority area.

Applicants will need to demonstrate how the grant will help them create new employment opportunities, or develop new products, processes, or services within their business. They will also be expected to match-fund the amount of grant applied for by at least 50% of the total investment.

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A packed Big Top for Sara's keynote address on day one



Teresa Heath-Wareing (left) in conversation with Youtubers Andrew and Pete



Neo Chatyoka spoke about 'breaking the rules'



Paul Fernandez gave a presentation on the anatomy of digital growth



Washington Ali asked - why are you pretending NOT to be great?

Headline speakers inspiring others to reach for the top

Crafting queen and TV 'Dragon' Sara Davies was among a stellar line-up of headline speakers at a Shropshire business festival with a difference.

Peakefest brought entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners together for a weekend-long programme of talks and networking opportunities at the Apley Estate between Telford and Bridgnorth.

The aim was to create an event 'where luxury festival vibes meet actionable business insights'.

Sara, the founder of Crafter's Companion who has been part of the Dragons' Den panel for the past five years, re-organised her diary to ensure she was able to appear at the 'incredible' event.

She said: "Given that the audience was 98% women, I focused my talk around stories from my life that have really shaped who I am and my journey as a woman and a mam in business."

She talked about...

- Mam-guilt (or mum-guilt for non-northerners!) - how there is absolutely no place for it in this world and how she manages to overcome it.

- Being present - how she learned the importance of this at a critical moment in her life and how she implements it in everything she does.



Crafting queen and TV 'Dragon' Sara Davies

- Imposter Syndrome - when she suffers from it and how she deals with it; something she felt really hit hard with a lot of people in the audience.

- Self-care - why it's important, how it's so easy to deprioritise, and the tricks she has learned on how to fit it into her life.

- Finding your tribe - how you're a product of the people you surround yourself with and how to get it right.

Sara said: "There were people in the

audience frantically scribbling down what I was sharing, and I could see from the looks on people's faces how much they were identifying with what I was saying and the profound impact it was having on them - just knowing they weren't the only ones managing these emotions and having a toolkit for dealing with them.

"It certainly 'filled my cup up' knowing I'd had such an impact on such an amazing group of women. So I filled them up with energy and enthusiasm, then sent them on their merry way



Nicola Peake with Sara Davies

to have a fabulous festival weekend glamping, networking, and learning."

The weekend-long event, which drew visitors from all over the country - many camping on site - was organised by Bridgnorth-based entrepreneur Nicola Peake, who described it as 'the hardest, toughest, most challenging and most rewarding thing I've ever done'.

Other headline speakers included Bianca Miller-Cole, who appeared on BBC's The



Entrepreneur and former candidate on The Apprentice Bianca Miller-Cole



Apley Estate was a spectacular setting for Peakefest

Apprentice in 2014 and has been named in the Forbes' 30 Under 30 list of successful entrepreneurs.

She is now a bestselling author and an award-winning entrepreneur who founded personal branding company The Be Group.

Nicola has already announced plans to bring Peakefest back again for 2025, with the weekend of July 10 and 11 pencilled in at a venue that will be confirmed soon.

"Peakefest hasn't just left people with that

gorgeous, warm feeling, after having fun with incredible people.

"It has brought personal breakthroughs and helped people to believe in themselves on a deeper level.

"When you're surrounded by like-minded people who are all there to grow and make stuff happen, the magic is undeniable. You build relationships that go way beyond the surface level and actually lead to real opportunities and collaborations."



A packed audience for Sara Davies's Saturday morning session



The event's compere Jessica Jones



Networking and making new friends



Headline speaker Sarah Gray talked about 'Mic Drop Money' - turning stages into mega paydays



The Peakefest site at Apley estate

● Peakefest 2024 pictures by Vicki Head Photography and TyneSight Photographic Services

New jobs predicted via Net Zero Growth Plan

New training centres are opening across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire as part of a £2.5 million package to boost skills in the manufacturing, engineering and construction sectors.

The Government's Net Zero Growth Plan predicts hundreds of thousands of new job opportunities in the coming years in areas such as heat pump installation and solar panel maintenance, as well as electric vehicle manufacturing and environmental consultancy.

To address staff and skills shortages in these areas, funding from the Government's Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF) has been supplied to the Marches Education Partnership, with a particular focus on 'green' technologies.

The partnership consists of Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire College, Shrewsbury College and Telford College, working with local training providers Herefordshire and Worcestershire Group Training Association, In-Comm Training, and SBC Training Services, and supported by Telford & Wrekin Council.

The money has been spent on new equipment and technology and the creation of 14 new training centres.

The centres are delivering new courses and teaching facilities, including workshops and refurbished classrooms fitted out with industry-standard equipment, working closely with local employers.

The courses address specific skills needs identified as priority sectors for the Marches in the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), produced for the region by Shropshire Chamber of Commerce.

The LSIP highlighted significant shortages of manufacturing, engineering and maintenance



Green technology is at the heart of the Marches Education Partnership's skills-boosting strategy

staff in our region, and a need to upskill existing workers.

Projects coming on stream from the partners over the coming weeks include the launch of a new advanced fabrication and welding facility at Shrewsbury College, a series of 16 short courses at Telford College, new green technology solutions facilities at Herefordshire Ludlow and North Shropshire College, and a £200,000 state-of-the-art automation cell at In-Comm Training's technical academy in Telford.

The aim of the Marches Education Partnership is to ensure that people seeking careers or looking to upskill for career development can access improved skills training, helping them secure good jobs closer to home.

The Partnership says: "We want to prepare the future workforce by developing a skills training response to include appropriate digital, electronics, electrical, mechanical, and technical skills to expand and maintain automated production facilities."

Awareness week receives praise from King Charles

The King has praised the launch of the UK's first ever Damp & Mould Action and Awareness Week, which has been spearheaded by an award-winning Shropshire company.

Landlords, housing officials and lobbying groups have all backed the campaign, which has been launched by Oswestry home life safety company Aico.

It has been described as 'highly commendable' by King Charles in a letter sent to the organisers.

Damp and mould impacts over seven million households in the UK, and according to the Institute of Health Equity, illnesses linked to cold, damp and dangerous homes cost the NHS more than £2.5 billion a year.

The week featured a podcast and series of webinars which heard from a number of landlords and health and housing officials involved in identifying the problems associated with damp and mould and finding solutions.

It was backed by renowned architectural expert Professor Timothy Sharpe from the University of Strathclyde, a member of the government's SAGE advisory group during the Covid pandemic, who specialises in indoor ventilation and transmission, as well as lobbying groups like Healthy Homes Hub and housing groups.



Chris Jones, chief executive of HomeLink

The issue of damp and mould was brought to public attention in 2020 following the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak from a severe respiratory infection caused by prolonged exposure to damp and mould in his home.

Chris Jones, chief executive of HomeLink, Aico's connected home solution, said: "We are using the opportunity to highlight the significant health impacts associated with damp and mould and how important it is to address these problems promptly."

"We hope that by raising awareness and encouraging residents, landlords and housing officials to work together, we can help create healthier living conditions for all residents, particularly those in the social housing sector, where these issues are most prevalent."

Retrofitting knowledge at new event

Traders across Shropshire wanting to expand their retrofit knowledge and explore new business opportunities are being invited to an event at Shrewsbury Town Football Club on November 14.

Retrofitting Shropshire – a chance to meet members of the local supply chain – will run from 8.30am to 11.30am in the Sovereign Suite.

It being organised by Shropshire Council's affordable warmth and energy efficiency team to bring together contractors from across Shropshire, representing various trades including electricians, plasterers, gas fitters, glaziers, self-employed DIY enthusiasts, and more.

The event is designed to raise awareness and understanding of current retrofit programmes, standards, and the essential skills required in the field.

Shropshire Council deputy leader, Councillor Ian Nellins, said: "Retrofitting is a key part of our ambition to become a net zero carbon county by 2030. We are committed to supporting local businesses and ensuring they have the skills needed to thrive in the evolving market."

For more information, or to register for the event, search for 'Retrofitting Shropshire Event' on Eventbrite.

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McPhillips director Chris Walker



An artist's impression of how the site will look

More choice for retirement

McPhillips (Wellington) Ltd has secured a major new contract to deliver a £20 million retirement community in Shropshire.

The construction and civil engineering company will develop land off the A41 in Newport into 61 apartments and 15 bungalows for retirement community specialist Untold Living.

The project aims to provide flexible living for older residents, with Newport being one of three communities of its type across the UK.

McPhillips director Chris Walker said: "We are really looking forward to developing this scheme for Untold Living and for Newport."

"There's a significant benefit for the local community through our directly employed workforce and our established local supply chain. And of course, for the environment too, given we're only based a few miles up the road."

"This is an exciting new development for Newport, a growing town with a population which is needing more choice for those who are retired or approaching their retirement."

Russell Jewell, chief executive of Untold Living, said: "We're delighted to award the contract for this build to McPhillips – a local firm with a 60 year history in the area. It's important to us that Newport and the wider surrounding community sees the benefit of our investment here."

"The project will naturally also help to free up larger homes for families looking to upsize or move to the area so it's a real win on all fronts."

Construction work is now getting under way on the site which is opposite Mere Park Garden Centre and off Palisade Close, off the A41.

Mr Walker said: "We are in the process of siting a unit near the entrance to the site and we would welcome anyone interested in the scheme to pop by and view the development plans and layout."

Untold Living, which is backed by a London-based private equity firm, was granted full planning permission for the site earlier this year after it secured a £26.4 million loan to support the development.

Untold currently has a 69-unit retirement community in Wiltshire and an in-house CQC registered care business.

McPhillips is one of the Midlands' biggest construction companies and has delivered more than 140 projects as principal contractor with a value of £300 million in the last five years. It recently completed the refurbishment of Telford Fire Station on Stafford Park, and employs more than 240 people at its Hortonwood site in Telford.

"This is an exciting new development for Newport, a growing town with a population which is needing more choice for those who are retired."

Becoming a big cheese

A Shropshire cheese manufacturer has secured £1 million in debt funding to help drive expansion in a 'bumper year' and fulfil its fast-growing order book.

The cash has been supplied to Nantwich Cheese Company from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II, through its appointed fund manager Frontier Development Capital.

The Whitchurch-based business supplies the catering and hospitality industries, schools, hospitals and food manufacturers, and also makes products for retailers including Aldi's 'own label' range of waxed cheeses.

The company sources cheese from British and continental producers then processes and packs it at its north Shropshire plant. It offers a full range of formats including sliced, diced, grated and crumbed and block cheese, along with blended cheeses ranging from traditional favourites to more novel varieties.

Nantwich Cheese Company was founded in 2009 by Wayne Morgan, who has over 40 years' experience and is well known in the industry. He was later joined by his son Luke who had previously held senior positions in Nando's grocery business, and who took over as CEO five years ago.

Since then, turnover has climbed steadily, from £5 million in 2019 to £12 million in 2023, and is on course to reach £17 million in the current year following a number of major new contract wins.

The company currently employs 31 people, having recently taken on eight new recruits, and expects to create five more jobs in the year ahead.

Luke Morgan said: "Our success lies partly in our ability to provide a one-stop shop and offer a full range of products at competitive prices."

"As a smaller firm we are also very nimble and can respond quickly to customers' needs and offer rapid turnaround times. After years of steady growth, 2024 is turning out to be a bumper year for us. The funding will provide us with working capital to fulfil the growing order book and continue expanding the team."



From left, Beth Bannister of British Business Bank, Luke Morgan of Nantwich Cheese Company, Diane Watt and Steve Morris of FDC

Beth Bannister, senior investment manager at British Business Bank, said: "Supporting Midlands' businesses with access to the finance options that help them grow and succeed is exactly what the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II aims to achieve."

"This latest investment in Nantwich Cheese Company demonstrates the fund's continuing commitment to growing and scalable businesses in the region."

Diane Watt, director at FDC, said: "The UK has a formidable reputation for its cheese but the industry has faced real challenges in recent years such as rising costs, disrupted supply chains and changing tastes."

"Luke and the Nantwich team have successfully navigated the changing landscape and taken the company from strength to

strength. We are pleased to be able to support them in their growth plans."

David Keenan of Nimbus Finance and Keith Knight at Alextra Group Accountants advised the company, along with Emma Johnstone at Hill Dickinson LLP.

The £400 million Midlands Engine Investment Fund II covers the entire Midlands region and provides debt finance from £25,000 to £2 million and equity investment up to £5 million, to help a range of small and medium sized businesses to start up, scale up or stay ahead.

The purpose of the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II is to drive sustainable economic growth by supporting innovation and creating local opportunities for new and growing businesses across the Midlands.

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Managing risk, and good governance

By Eddie Allan

The Good2Great team constantly sees new start-ups shy away from developing a cash flow. As one of them put it: “It all becomes real.”

But it is extremely important to understand what you are planning financially and compare against your future actual sales and spend.

Cash Flow: Projection and Actual

To understand what will potentially happen in your business, you need to develop a projected cash flow for the next 12 months. These are some of the things you should consider on a monthly basis:

- **Sales:** What will your income be each month? Think about what marketing you will be carrying out, what revenue will it produce. Document your monthly income on a spreadsheet like this:

Opening Balance	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7	Month 8	Month 9	Month 10	Month 11	Month 12	TOTAL
Income													
TOTAL													
Costs													
TOTAL													
Closing Balance													

- **Costs:** Schedule your variable costs monthly – in other words, what do you need to spend to produce your products or services? List your fixed costs (a way to think of this is to consider what you would need to spend even if you didn't make any sales – known as an 'overhead').

Don't forget marketing costs, and VAT too if you are registered for it, because this will need to be paid to HMRC.

Your projected cash flow will allow you to plan for your next 12 months and identify any 'pinch points'.

As the year progresses you need to record your 'actual' income and spend. Ask yourself questions like: Did you do better or worse in a certain month? Do you need to increase sales or adjust spend? It allows you to make informed decisions.

Using your **projected** cash flow and matching it to your **actual** is a key tool your business development.

Risk, Resilience and Governance

With start-ups this is not always top of the agenda, but it is something which definitely needs addressing.

Some might see entrepreneurs as risk takers, but an effective one will address and mitigate risk as much as they can. They make informed decisions based on research and advice.

They are the **opportunity takers**.



Eddie Allan, head of programme delivery at Good2Great

Use of Policies, Insurance and Contracts

- **Policies:** Insurers may demand policies in order to provide relevant insurance, HR, GDPR, fire safety, health and safety services and possibly many more. The Federation of Small Business is a great resource for source documents.
- **Insurance:** You can insure almost anything to mitigate risk, but public liability, professional indemnity and employer's liability may be a place to start. Engage a reputable insurance broker – they will guide you.
- **Contracts:** There's a phrase which says: "Good fences make good neighbours!" Ensure you have essential contracts in place, plus terms and conditions. This will ensure your customer knows what you will do and what you expect of them. T&Cs are **vital**; businesses really see their importance when something goes wrong, such as when they haven't been paid. Contracts of employment and confidentiality agreements are also areas to review as they are essential in good governance.

This concludes Good2Great's six-part Business Start Up series for 2024. Hopefully it has been a good guide for the budding entrepreneur.

● **Eddie Allan is head of programme delivery at Bridgnorth consultants Good2Great. You can apply for the Telford Growth Enabler programme if you have a business trading for over six months located in the Telford and Wrekin local authority area - see the link/QR code shown in the banner below. Alternatively contact start@good-2-great.co.uk for any more information.**

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Celebrating success stories

We turn the spotlight on two business women who are turning their passion into profit-making enterprises

Amie's skincare passion



Amie said completing the business start-up programme with Good2Great had provided her with a big boost

Amie Wood has launched a new clinic, called Bespoke Skin Solution, after completing Good2Great's start-up programme.

"As a teenager and in my early 20s my skin really knocked my confidence. I was on medication and nothing seemed to help until I came across skin peels and these transformed my skin," she said.

"I developed a passion for skin care and have wanted to share my knowledge and make other people feel great. I create bespoke treatments using clinically-tested products to target skin concerns."

Amie said completing the business start-up programme with Good2Great had provided her with a big boost, encouraging her to provide treatments with passion and confidence.

The programme consists of 12 hours of guided learning and one-to-one support by an experienced team who have all either run, or are still running, their own businesses – which means they fully understand the challenges to a new entrepreneur.

● **If you want to find out more about Bespoke Skin Solution, visit <https://bespokeskin.uk/>**

Jodie is following her dreams



"As well as selling original works, taking commissions and selling prints of my work, I also offer oil painting workshops," says Jodie

Jodie Oakeshott, a project manager with a telecoms company, has now decided to follow her dream after recently completing a start-up programme with Good2Great.

"I graduated from art school 20 years ago but have not picked up a paint brush until recently," she said.

"I've rediscovered my passion and decided that I want to sell my work and share my art with the world.

"My subjects are people, plants, animals and objects and my style is realism. As well as selling original works, taking commissions and selling prints of my work, I also offer oil painting workshops, teaching people how to use oil paint to create their own artwork."

She added: "I've met loads of other creative people and others who have been great to share ideas with along the way. The modules have been really good in helping me to clarify my ideas and form my business plan.

"The course offers great resources and networking opportunities too."

● **To contact Jodie, visit www.instagram.com/Jodie_oakeshott_artist**

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 We are overwhelmed with the response, finalists will be announced soon!

GOOD2GREAT



The Cold Chain Live conference was staged in the Ludlow Suite at Telford International Centre

Conference-goers play it cool

Leaders and influencers from the cold chain sector descended on Telford International Centre for one of the industry's biggest and most important conferences.

The two-day Cold Chain Live conference and exhibition brought together insights from world leading experts, with open discussion on practical challenges and opportunities in cold storage, transport, compliance, and sustainability.

Among the key discussion themes were the state of the cold chain, how it can drive UK economic prosperity, embracing a changing workforce to futureproof the supply chain, and cold chain sustainability, resilience and social responsibility.

The event was organised by the Cold Chain Federation, the voice of the temperature-controlled supply chain in the UK. Members are businesses who operate frozen and chilled storage facilities and/or temperature-controlled distribution vehicles plus companies who have mutual commercial or policy interests.

Flying the flag for Shropshire in the exhibition hall was Seymour Manufacturing International. The Stafford Park-based business was showcasing its Cold-Stop thermal curtains, plus pallet covers, liners, and the award-winning Back-Stop system for keeping food on the move in optimum condition.

Other county-based delegates attending the event included representatives of Culina Group, Cold Move, and Americold of Whitchurch.

Organisers said the event – which had been a ‘sold out smash hit’ for the past two years – was even bigger and better this year. They have confirmed the event will be returning to Telford next year.



Dave Arthur, Ross Clarke and Jill Seymour of Seymour Manufacturing International



The BBC's Maryam Moshiri was host for the event



Hundreds of business people attended the event and exhibition



Cold chain innovation on display in Telford



Shaun Carvill

How do you get yourself to the top of the search engine rankings? This is a question every website owner asks, as ranking high on search engines like Google can bring in loads of traffic and new customers.

Quite a challenge to answer this one, but let's see if I can help...

Focus on quality content

The foundation of good SEO is high quality content. Google's primary aim is to give users the best possible answers to their questions, so if your website provides valuable, relevant information, it's much more likely to rank well. This means creating content that addresses your audience's needs, answers their questions, and provides value. Think blog posts, guides, how-to articles, and more.

Keep your content fresh by regularly updating your blog or news section with relevant, well-researched posts.

Also, ensure that your writing is clear, easy to understand, and structured properly – using headings and sub-headings to keep both users and search engines navigating your content.

Get your keywords right

Keywords are the terms people type into search engines when they're looking for information.

To rank higher, you need to use the right keywords in your content. Start by researching what your audience is searching for.

There are free tools (like Google's Keyword Planner) that can help you find popular keywords related to your industry.

Once you have a list of keywords, incorporate them naturally into your content but don't overdo it. Google penalises sites that try to "stuff" too many keywords into their pages.

Make sure the keywords fit in naturally within your text, headings, and meta descriptions.

Make sure your website is mobile-friendly

With so much traffic coming from mobile devices, Google now ranks mobile-friendly websites higher in search results.

This means your site needs to look and work well on smartphones and tablets.

A responsive design, where your site automatically adjusts to different screen sizes,



Taking an SEO rocket to the top

is key. If your site isn't mobile-optimised, you could be missing out on a big chunk of traffic and rank lower as a result.

Improve your site speed

Page load speed is another major factor in how Google ranks websites.

A slow site can frustrate visitors and make them leave, which increases your bounce rate (where users leave after viewing only one page).

Google takes this into account, so the faster your site loads, the better.

To improve site speed, you can optimise your images, reduce the number of plugins, and make sure you're using good, fast hosting services.

There are free tools, like Google's PageSpeed Insights, which can give you tips on improving your site's performance.

Optimise on-page SEO elements

These days technical SEO is much more important than previously.

There are a few technical things you can do to improve your ranking, known as on-page SEO.

These include optimising your title tags, meta descriptions, and headers. Make sure each page has a unique title and description that includes your target keywords. Use descriptive headers (H1, H2, etc.) to organise your content.

Also, ensure your URLs (web addresses) are short, descriptive, and include keywords.

For example, instead of a URL like "yourwebsite.com/page123," something like "yourwebsite.com/best-seo-tips" will perform better.

Don't forget about local SEO

If your business serves a specific area, local SEO can help you rank higher in local searches. Make sure your business is listed on Google My Business and that your name, address, and phone number are consistent across all platforms.

Encourage satisfied customers to leave reviews, as these can also boost your local rankings.

Monitor your analytics

It's essential to keep an eye on how your SEO efforts are paying off.

Use tools like Google Analytics and Google Search Console to track your rankings, see where your traffic is coming from, and identify areas for improvement. SEO is an ongoing process, so keep refining your strategy based on what's working.

To sum up: getting to the top of search engine rankings takes time and consistent effort. And let's be honest, there are no guarantees you will get there.

However, focus on creating high quality content, using the right keywords, ensuring your site is mobile-friendly and fast, and optimising your on-page elements.

Shaun Carvill is the founder and managing director of Bridgnorth-based digital agency Clickingmad. He has launched a new podcast series called 'Website Success In Five Minutes'.

Children's charity benefits from an amazing donation

Japanese printing products and accessories firm Epson has raised an incredible £50,000 to support a Shropshire charity.

The manufacturer, which has a base at Hortonwood in Telford, has been supporting Hope House for 28 years, and been involved in events including the 36-hour fundraiser Final Moments Matter and the Telford Dark Run.

Hope House children's hospice cares for and supports local children with life-threatening conditions and their families.

A team from Epson was invited to visit the hospice, near Oswestry, to be presented with a flower painting created by children in the hospice playroom. The flower was the perfect shade of Epson blue!

Fundraiser Dawn Ball said: "Epson are such supportive partners who have worked with us since 1996, almost from when the hospice was first opened.

"As well as raising money through individual events and joining our Telford Dark Run, they have been kind enough to offer match funding for our Final Moments Matter campaigns. Together, these generous donations have exceeded the £50,000 milestone."

Brooke Hamilton, PA to Epson's managing director, said: "We are



Epson staff at Hope House – Rachel Meredith (senior manager and company secretary), Kirsty Ryan (HR manager), Brooke Hamilton (PA to the managing director), and Kiera Kumar (assistant business analyst)

incredibly proud to have reached this significant milestone of donating a total of £50,000 to Hope House over the years. It is a privilege to support an organisation that provides such vital care and comfort to families during some of the most challenging moments in their lives.

"This achievement reflects our commitment to helping Hope House continue their incredible work, and we look forward to continuing our partnership with them to help more families in need."



How to make a business listen to you

Martyn James



I don't want to rub it in, but I've just got back from a wonderful holiday. However, now I'm paying the price. I'm currently sorting out the bills, dealing with a ridiculous 'to do' list, and working out what complaints I need to make to businesses.

As a point of principle, I never use my journalist powers when registering my own complaints. I follow the same processes as everyone else, so I understand what we are all going through. And let me tell you: I am fed up! I've written a lot about how businesses seem to be making it as difficult as possible to contact them. There are lots of reasons for this, including cutting staff in customer service, automation, avoiding registering complaints or even just not caring that much about what we have to say.

All of which I'll be covering in future

columns, along with investigating the worst offenders. But first: how do you get a business to listen to you? Here's my guide.

While many businesses do have telephone numbers, these are often buried deep in the depths of their websites. It took me over 20 clicks to find the number of one telecommunications company, ironically! You'll find you have to click through endless Q&A pages before you default to a contact number.

Save yourself some time and use a search drive instead. Just type in the name of the business and 'contact number' or 'complaints' and you'll usually find your way to the number much quicker.

If no number comes up, use a forum to find one. Back in the early days of the internet, forums were the places to be for getting information on businesses that were reluctant to communicate.

There are loads of them still in operation. MoneySavingExpert forum has hundreds of thousands of users, for one. You can always type 'I can't find a number for [business name]' into a search drive which will usually flush out a forum with the number. Check how old the posts are first though and watch out for scammers.

If there's a phone number, aim to call during off-peak hours. As a general rule, the two best times to call businesses are late morning (10am to 11.30am) and mid-afternoon (2pm to 4pm). As the week progresses, from Monday to Friday, it tends to get easier to get hold of businesses too.

Let's get to the fun stuff. Why not confuse

a chatbot or artificial intelligence? Businesses are obsessed with automated customer service – but at the moment, it's really, really basic. Most chatbots are only programmed to answer certain questions and can't deal with the quirks of the English language – and that isn't going to change too much with AI for now.

Fabulously, most automated customer service bots default to actual humans if you persist or respond randomly. Type in something bonkers like 'Flibbertigibbet' until the bot gives up and hands you to a person.

I really hate Twitter/X with all my heart. We really shouldn't be forced to use social media if we don't want to, but if there's no other way to contact a business then it can be a useful last resort.

A few businesses actually have chatbots operating their social media, but most have customer service teams monitoring tweets and they usually respond quickly. If you sign up to Twitter just for complaints, it's the most effective social media option (but don't engage with the angry, shouty people online).

A word of warning though. Which? recently found out that scammers are pretending to be legitimate businesses by buying 'blue ticks'. So find the proper social media link on the business website.

Then there's the nuclear option – act like you're cancelling the service. If you have any kind of agreement with a business and they aren't responding to your complaints, why not start the process of cancelling the service?

There's usually a separate phone number for this that will have a human available to talk to!

Martyn James is a leading consumer rights campaigner, TV and radio broadcaster and journalist

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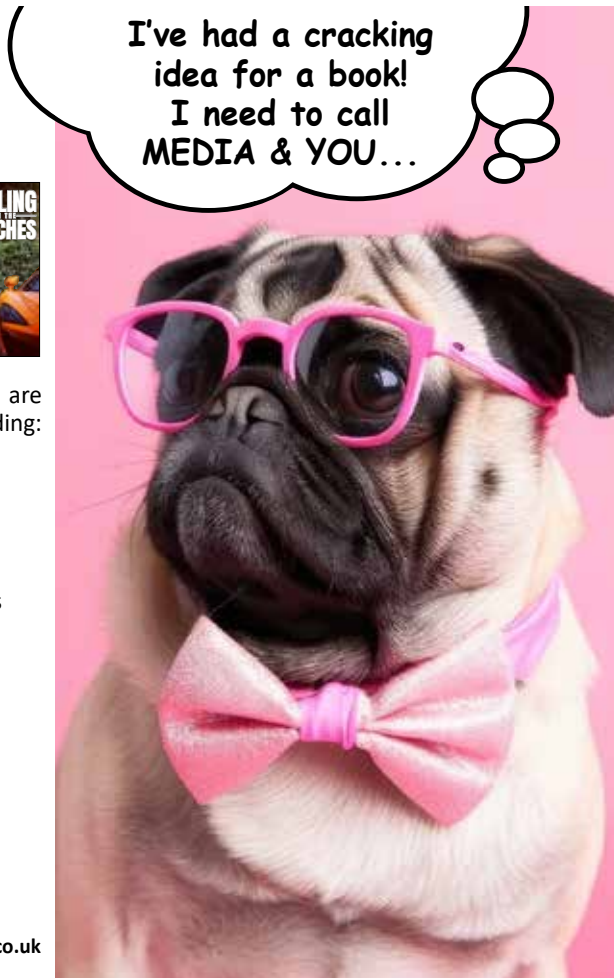


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Rudells' outlet in Birmingham's city centre is situated next to the Burlington Hotel on New Street

City centre move for Rudells

Patek Philippe agent opening boutique store on New Street, Birmingham

These are "very exciting times" admits Jon Weston, the managing director of Rudell the Jewellers.

Jon is referring to a first for the West Midlands jewellers – a Rudells outlet in Birmingham's city centre, next to the Burlington Hotel on New Street to be exact.

Rudells have been a much-loved part of the West Midlands' high-end jewellery scene since the 1930s, with their shops in Harborne and Wolverhampton selling top-brand watches and other precious items for discerning clientele who have often included generations of the same family.

But this is a new opportunity – neither Harborne nor Wolverhampton can compete with Birmingham city centre for footfall or prestige. And what underpins it is what Jon refers to as its anchor – the iconic brand Patek Philippe. Rudells is Patek Philippe's sole Birmingham agent.

"So, with respect to Harborne and Wolverhampton, we need to be in the city centre," says Jon.

"I am really excited by the opportunity to be honest, and we are on course for opening in November since we took on the site in May this year. Our team of shopfitters from Esprit have been wonderful!"

The idea of taking on a city-centre site had actually been germinating for several years, and Jon first looked at the outlet some six years ago. It ticked all the boxes in terms of size and position, and it had an ideal frontage.

"In our industry, we always want as much as we can get in terms of fabulous windows, for obvious reasons," he says.

"What you don't want is a narrow unit that's got a small window at the front and a really long narrow interior. In 2022 the agents indicated they were softly marketing it and things have moved along swiftly since then."

What was key to Jon's decision to take on the site was Patek Philippe's response.



The idea of taking on a city-centre site had been several years in the making

"I invited Patek Philippe to come up and have a look at it, back in February 2023, and they were absolutely thrilled with the idea.

"The world's number-one watch brand must have representation in the city centre. Now that we are moving Patek Philippe there, along with several other top-level brands we sell, the Birmingham shopping public will have the best experience available to them where watches and jewellery are concerned.

"So for me, taking on the site on New Street was a no-brainer. It is just a magical opportunity."

Jon also makes the point that the location in the city centre is a particularly good spot on New Street, next to the Burlington Hotel.

This is, in itself, not without significance. The hotel – or what was originally the Midland Hotel – has always been a popular destination for travellers from other parts of the country to stay when visiting the city.

As Jon says: "I was chatting with a couple of new clients, based down in London, and I pointed out that they can get to New Street from Euston in an hour and a half. We are only 100 metres from the station.



An artist's impression of the new Birmingham store



The showroom is approximately 4,000 sq ft, spread over two floors



It is a particularly good spot on New Street, next to the Burlington Hotel

"So there's the location, and also the footfall, which is huge compared to Harborne and Wolverhampton if I'm honest.

"It's incredibly impressive premises – but it's our job to entice the public in and show them what we are all about."

Let's find out a little more what visitors to the new Rudells in New Street will find.

First of all, it's a reasonably large showroom, amounting to approximately 4,000 sq ft, spread over two floors. There will be recurring motifs from Rudells' existing showrooms – we can expect maple and Canadian walnut, and mocha and cream colours with eye-catching splashes of colour.

The staircase will be a feature in itself – "elegant and glass panelled", according to Jon.

But what about the brands? The ground floor will be occupied predominantly by Patek Philippe, but customers can expect to find jewellery from the likes of Chopard, Fope, Messika, Georg Jensen – and Marco Bicego – pearls from Mikimoto and pens from Mont Blanc.

So it isn't all the Patek Philippe show. However, Jon's excitement levels rise when discussing the space devoted to the legendary watchmaker – and his descriptions go some way to illustrate the focus on the whole customer experience at Rudells.

"Their area is beautiful, quite exquisite," says Jon. "There's a viewing area, a private consultation area and a VIP area, in which we will have a dining table able to seat eight people.

"So if we're doing private launches of particular models, we can entertain the clients there with some outside catering.

"And if you have four or five members of a family, we can sit them down very easily at the table here and it just makes the whole experience far more pleasurable for them."

Jon uses the term 'experience' a lot, to differentiate buying an item at Rudells as beyond a straight over-the-till transaction, and he fully recognises that some of the items the showroom has to offer are special gifts to last not only one lifetime – but possibly for future generations as well.

To give this sort of occasion the level of drama it deserves, the team at Rudells are installing what they call a 'reveal cabinet' in the Birmingham store.

Jon explains: "Let's say there's a member of the family you want to surprise, and you have bought them a wonderful gift. We put that in a frosted glass cabinet.

"You come and sit down, we get the champagne open, have a bit of a chat and then do the reveal. We press a button and the glass goes from frosted to transparent, revealing the item. I think you'll find this is a first in Birmingham."

The utmost care has been taken in the staffing of the Birmingham showroom. Jon has been careful to ensure that while the experience and expertise necessary for the new showroom has been drafted in from Harborne and Wolverhampton and externally, ensuring all three sites will continue to operate seamlessly.

The brands on sale in Birmingham have also been chosen carefully. "We are completing the jigsaw and complementing the whole jewellery offer in Birmingham, because what we're not doing is taking brands down there that other people are already selling. So we're making a wider choice available to the discerning public.

"I know and feel that Birmingham will become our new flagship store for sure. And I think it has huge potential, or I wouldn't even be entertaining the idea of going there.

"We very much look forward to welcoming our clients both old and new.

"These are very exciting times."



Jon Weston, managing director

Creating a partnership to transform town



Pictured at the Wellington event are, from left, Professor Steve Millington, Gavin Ashford of Telford & Wrekin Council, Sally Themans, and James Dunn of Telford & Wrekin Council

Collaboration and partnership working are the key to a successful town centre... that was the key message from a seminar held at Wellington Orbit.

Delegates heard from Professor Steve Millington of the High Street Task Force – a five-year Government programme aimed at providing guidance and skills to help councils, communities and partnerships transform their offerings.

He said: “Many towns would give their right arm for a facility such as the Orbit. We have got to redefine our high streets so they are not just about retail – they encompass health, education and entertainment.

“Vitality and viability are what’s needed and the keys to this are successful networks and collaborations.”

The event was organised by Good2Great, the business growth and place making specialists. Councillor Lee Carter, leader of Telford & Wrekin Council, also emphasised that working together was the way forward.

He said: “We have achieved a lot but there is always more to do. Partnerships have been vitally important in transforming Wellington.

“Telford & Wrekin Council’s ‘Pride in our High Street’ project is highly effective in this. We have awarded 365 grants in total so far, creating 382 jobs and cutting shop vacancy rates to 3.6%.

“We also now have £7.6 million of infrastructure projects under way.”

Council is on the move as staff offices relocate

Shropshire Council is to move its operations from its Shirehall headquarters into other premises, including the Guildhall in Shrewsbury town centre.

Staff will begin moving into the Guildhall, which the council already owns and which is being vacated by the University of Chester, from November.

The majority of back office and essential statutory services will move to the Guildhall building covering areas such as registrars, public protection and legal and democratic services.

The move is part of the local authority’s bid to slash its budget and become more efficient and financially sustainable.

Dean Carroll, cabinet member for housing and assets, said: “From the public perspective there will be no immediate change to how the Council operates and provides services. It is simply that we are moving to a more cost-effective base of operations.

“What this change does allow us to do is review and update how we work; this will be reflected in better facilities for the Registration and Coroners’ services. We will also be able to work across departments better to provide more joined-up solutions and services for Shropshire.

“Shirehall is outdated, expensive to maintain, and energy inefficient. It costs £1.3 million annually to operate and needs significant investment to meet modern standards.

“Our current administrative needs are smaller, and hybrid working allows for cost savings and a reduced carbon footprint.

“Moving Shropshire Council’s civic office to the town centre will boost the local economy by increasing footfall and daytime spending, enhancing Shrewsbury’s vitality and attracting market investment.

“Shropshire Council is changing how it is organised and runs its services to become the council it needs to be – modern, efficient and financially sustainable, so that it can focus its resources on the core services needed by the residents of Shropshire.”

Moving Shropshire Council’s civic office to the town centre will boost the local economy by increasing footfall and daytime spending, enhancing Shrewsbury’s vitality and attracting market investment

OUR EVENTS COMING SOON



Following the success of the first ever Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards, SBLTV and Yarrington are delighted to be launching a new series of awards for 2025, celebrating the best of the best across a range of important sectors across our county.

It’s a great opportunity to promote and showcase your businesses - from farms and restaurants to shops, leisure establishments and much more.

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Matthew Roberts, left, and Annette Harrison, right, with some of the 2024 intake of apprentices

Next generation

Shropshire-based building contractor SJ Roberts Construction has welcomed its latest cohort of apprentices with 13 new team members either starting or continuing their training with the company.

For the first time, the company is offering an HNC architectural studies apprenticeship which Honor Davies is studying on a part-time basis at Wolverhampton University.

Matthew Roberts, construction director at SJ Roberts, said: "There remains a perception that apprentices in the construction sector are all brickies and carpenters, and while these are a vital part of the overall apprenticeship mix, the opportunities are far broader.

"We've long championed developing our in-house skills across a wide range of different trades so it's great to now welcome Honor as an architectural studies apprentice."

Honor said: "I knew I wanted to pursue a career in architecture, but didn't want to do the traditional university route, so this option of studying part time while working was the best route for me. I joined SJ Roberts Construction in February which was great as it has allowed me to settle in and gain valuable workplace experience before starting my HNC in September.

"Already I've been involved in so much including working on customer changes, conveyancing plans, site boundary plans, and new wall construction details for new house packs. It's real experience and I'm really enjoying it."

James returns to county

A Shropshire law firm has strengthened its commercial property and agriculture teams with the appointment of a new solicitor who is making a return to the Midlands.

James Dodson read law at the University of East Anglia and undertook residential and commercial property work during training, before focusing his practice on all aspects of commercial property upon qualification.

He said: "It is a great privilege to join Lanyon Bowdler. The firm is ranked in both the Legal 500 and Chambers UK, and has a strong reputation for its commercial property practice. I look forward to developing my career within the firm."

Praveen Chaudhari, head of Lanyon Bowdler's commercial and agricultural property department, said: "Demand continues to grow for our legal expertise in the area of agriculture and commercial property and we are delighted to welcome James to the team. He is already proving to be a valuable asset.

"He has an impressive CV and a strong sense of customer service and care for clients that are an essential part of who we are as a law firm."



James Dodson

Equity partners are appointed



Charlotte Shepherd and Guy Banham

Property consultancy Berrys has appointed two new equity partners.

Guy Banham, head of business, land use and finance joined Berrys in July 2012. He has an honours degree in agriculture with land and farm management from Harper Adams University College, is a fellow of the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants and a fellow of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers.

Guy specialises in business consultancy including strategic advice, budgeting and cash flow, grants and subsidies, landlord and tenant negotiation, succession planning, diversification, and agricultural planning appraisals.

Guy became a partner at Berrys in 2017.

Charlotte Shepherd is a chartered surveyor and joined Berrys in September 2014. She graduated with a first-class honours degree in rural enterprise and land management from Harper Adams University College in 2011, has been a member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors since 2012, and is a fellow of the Central Association of Agricultural

Valuers obtaining the highest mark in the 2016 examinations.

Charlotte specialises in strategic land promotion, including sale and acquisition of rural and development land. She also advises rural clients on succession planning, contract farming and share farming agreements, tenancies, licences, grants, overages and restrictive covenants. Charlotte became a partner at Berrys in 2020.

Stuart Thomas, chief executive officer at Berrys, said: "On behalf of the partnership, I am delighted to announce that Guy Banham and Charlotte Shepherd have been appointed as equity partners of our business.

"Guy and Charlotte have a wealth of experience in the property industry and their leadership, professionalism and expertise will be invaluable as we continue to grow our business and deliver exceptional services to our clients.

"Both are established members of the senior management team and they will play a key role in driving our growth and delivering our ambitious business plan over the next three years and beyond. We wish them every success in their new roles."

Supporting businesses on their journey

The British Business Bank has appointed Vicky Mears as its new director of UK network for the Midlands and north of England.

Vicky brings more than two decades of banking experience in various roles including trade finance, relationship management within business banking, senior branch management in retail banking, and project

management. Her experience also includes five years working with smaller businesses to support their expansion into international markets, understanding the issues they face when scaling up, and accessing finance.

She said: "Smaller businesses are critical to the UK economy, and I've seen first-hand the impact access to finance can have not

just for each business, but also the wider economy.

"It's no secret that market conditions for smaller businesses have been challenging over the last few years, but entrepreneurs should feel confident knowing that there are plenty of finance options and support out there to help them on their growth journey."

Promotions at law firm

Law firm Aaron & Partners has announced a new round of internal promotions across key departments, including three new partners and three new senior associates.

The law firm, which operates from offices in Shrewsbury, Chester, Greater Manchester, and the Wirral, has confirmed a total of eight team members across the business are set to move into more senior positions.

Among them are real estate solicitor Hannah Fynn, contested trusts and probate solicitor Vlad Macdonald-Munteanu, and employment solicitor Paul Hennity, who have all been made partners.

Hannah acts for an array of clients on matters concerning commercial property and mines and minerals, while Vlad's expertise lies in dealing with high value estate and trust disputes. Paul's experience is in dealing with claims in employment tribunals and negotiating settlement agreements.

Sarah Henderson from the wills, trusts and tax team, and Stephanie King from the real estate team have been promoted from associate to senior associate solicitor, recognising their experience and contributions to the firm.



Vlad Macdonald-Munteanu, Hannah Fynn and Paul Hennity are among the latest promotions at Aaron & Partners

Charlotte McCubbin, Leah Edwards and Rebecca Christian have all been promoted to associate level in light of their progress and increasing experience within the firm.

Nick Clarke, senior partner at Aaron & Partners, said: "We pride ourselves on having a genuine commitment to career development and personal advancement here, so it's a pleasure to announce another round of well-earned promotions."



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OSCAR'S TREE ACADEMY – TEACHING CHILDREN (AND ADULTS) ABOUT TREES AND NATURE



Cleo is on a placement **On the board**

Cleo Morris from Church Stretton has joined Forge Property Consultants on a year's undergraduate placement, working across the firm's offices in Shropshire and Staffordshire.

She has been studying for her degree in Real Estate at Harper Adams University for the past two years, and will be working with the company directors covering commercial, residential and agricultural property.

The 21-year-old said: "I met some of the Forge team at my university placement fair and I was so pleased that my application was successful. I'm looking forward to being on rotation and learning about lots of different aspects of property."

Forge Property Consultants is a firm of chartered surveyors and valuers, providing advice to clients on a wide range of property and land matters from its four offices in Shropshire, Staffordshire and North and South Wales.



Cleo Morris

Matt Potts, business growth and investment service manager at Shropshire Council and Invest In Shropshire, has been appointed to the board of Visit Shropshire.

He said he was delighted to join the organisation, which has become established as the official not-for-profit destination marketing organisation for Shropshire.

It says: "We passionately believe that our wonderful county can provide memorable experiences for visitors with all sorts of different wish lists, priorities and needs."



Matt Potts



Shoothill provides IT for Shrewsbury Town FC

Goal! for Shoothill

Shoothill has been appointed as the official IT service provider to Shrewsbury Town Football Club. The club will be utilising the company's full suite of IT services including IT support, cyber security, and ensuring the infrastructure is 'game-day ready' to support both fans and operations. "It's a chance for us to demonstrate the depth of our IT capabilities," said Shoothill managing director Simon Jeavons.



Emily Wakeman

Emily's promotion

Newport-based digital marketing and web design agency Ascendancy has promoted Emily Wakeman to the role of operations manager.

Emily joined Ascendancy in 2017 and made swift career progress, earning two promotions within the first 18 months, and a degree in digital and technology solutions after studying part-time alongside her day job.

The company has been taken over by Chris and Christina Morledge, and Chris said: "Emily's impact on the business has been significant. She impressed us very quickly and her new role within the company is fully-deserved."

Emily said: "I'm so happy to be recognised for my hard work over the last few years, and excited for the new challenges that lie ahead, for me, and for Ascendancy as a whole."

Chief of the people



Lyndsey Denning

Telford-based circular economy specialist Reconomy has a new chief people officer.

Lyndsey Denning has been with the business for 11 years, having started her career as an HR and training manager based at its offices on Stafford Park.

She said: "I'm thrilled to have been promoted to this role, and I am excited to continue working with incredible people as we work together to foster a vibrant and welcoming culture where our values and behaviours are actively lived and breathed at every level of the company."

Chief executive Guy Wakeley said: "Lyndsey has been a major driving force behind our success, championing our value, and working tirelessly to make sure Reconomy is a positive and inclusive place to work."

Internal promotion and appointment



Andrew Rushton (left) with Andy Bunce

Industrial automation specialist Iconsys has strengthened its sales team with an internal promotion and a high-profile appointment to help it achieve ambitious expansion plans.

The Telford company - which provides control and automation solutions, power conversion and system integration services to more than ten different sectors - has promoted Andy Bunce to technical sales director and recruited Andrew Rushton as group sales director.

This change aims to build on the firm's record year, which has seen it launch two new technical offices in Cheshire and Scotland, and increase orders to £14.5 million by the end of this year - a £5 million boost on the previous twelve months.

Andrew Rushton, a chartered engineer, is hugely experienced in developing global sales strategies and delivering sustained

growth across several sectors. One of these is energy, which is a key market for the company.

"This is a fantastic coup for our business and will create a lot of interest in our industry.

"Due to the size and complexity of our fast-growing business, we felt the need to bolster our sales organisation at the very top, in order to prepare for the future," said managing director Nick Darrall.

Working across the world, Andrew has held several account management and sales director positions for Schneider Electric and ABB, launching a new automation business and delivering sustained growth through key alliances and developing strategic accounts.

Andy Bunce has been with the company for 14 years and continues to be instrumental in building its sales and achieving financial success through his relentless delivery of world-class customer service to clients.



Owner Aaron Manley with racehorse Normal Fletcher

New ownership for a traditional pub

Aaron and Joanne Manley are the new owners of the Hare & Hounds pub at Withington near Shrewsbury.

The pub had been run by the Buswell family for the last 28 years, but has now reopened after a refurbishment and new branding.

Aaron, who is also the joint director of Mannleys Estate Agents in Wellington, said it had always been his dream to own this pub in particular.

"I grew up nearby and I spent a lot of my late teens and early 20s and 30s there, and I played for the darts team and was part of the pub golf society. I have always said I would buy this pub and the opportunity came along and I did. I am absolutely over the moon."

The pub has already had a very special visitor, a racehorse named Normal Fletcher which Aaron and Joanne have a part-share in.

A fresh new sound for Shropshire

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Five minutes with . . .

After more than 20 years supporting businesses in the public sector, CLAIRE CRITCHELL has now branched out on her own with the launch of a new business, Re:Be Consulting

WHAT DOES YOUR JOB INVOLVE?

Adding value to clients with effective business and marketing strategies, project support and business development.

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ECONOMY?

It hasn't been long enough to feel the effects myself, but I understand how challenging it can be for my clients and connections. My advice is to have a plan. It doesn't need to be a multi-page tome, but you should know where you're going and how you'll get there so you can react and adapt.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON THE CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT FOR YOUR JOB?

I'll be keeping an eye on things like tax changes, as even small percentage shifts will have an impact on small businesses like mine. Having spent over two decades in the public sector, I also hope for continuity in business support and that any growth funding reaches businesses directly without getting lost in bureaucracy.

HOW DO YOU SEE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – AN OPPORTUNITY, THREAT, OR BIT OF BOTH?

At a recent networking event, we discussed how game-changing tools like ChatGPT can be when used effectively. It's made us more efficient and helps overcome 'blank page syndrome'. If the human is informing and shaping the final version then I see it as a complimentary work tool.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?

Adds value, and is easy to work with.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Honesty, instinct and positivity.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?

Making sure I use my time effectively to support my clients, family and myself.

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?

Leaving the comfort of a salaried job to work for myself.

PET HATES?

Leaving the lights on, and not recycling.

IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF SOME WISE ADVICE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Make conscious choices. Breathe more. Find the joy.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?

Anything outside in nature away from human-made distractions.

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?

The hills, forests, fields and rivers.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?

LinkedIn for work. Instagram for personal.

FAVOURITE MOVIE?

I love a good movie and there are so many so I'll say the first one I remember making an impact was Kes.

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?

Early bird!

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?

I'd love to know more about my ancestors, so I'd get a few of them round the table from over the centuries.



Magical – the stunning Shropshire countryside



Claire Critchell



Kes, the classic Ken Loach movie

WHAT WOULD YOU COOK FOR THEM?

I love a good buffet, lots of plate-piling tasty morsels that everyone can enjoy.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOU THAT MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY WOULDN'T KNOW.

I was a big Guns N' Roses fan when I was a teenager, my room was plastered with posters and my wildest dream came true when I met them! My next door neighbour was Jason Bonham and on one very average Sunday morning he popped over with tickets – I nearly fainted! We jumped in the car and as we got closer to the stadium he handed me a VIP pass – we were going backstage! I watched the gig from the side of the stage with fans waving at me, thinking I was someone important. It was crazy!

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, AND YOUR JOB ROLE?

I hope for more of the same. I love being in the office every week with the brilliant Shoothill team, helping businesses succeed with smart digital solutions. It's a pleasure to contribute to Ammba's work in shaping places and public sector services through digital transformation, and the European Innovation team's commitment to helping businesses innovate and grow. I'd also like to take on a couple of strategic business and marketing projects.

Our People, Your Team.

Here to help you.

We can hold meetings via telephone and video and, of course, we are also able to offer meetings in person. Please contact us and a member of our team will be happy to help.

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