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IN PRINT

- 6 **Talking Point:** Do bosses expect us to spend more time in the office?
- 21 **Cover Story:** Telford-based business incubator reveals exciting plans
- 30 **Silver Anniversary:** County business awards celebrates big milestone
- 39 **First-time Author:** Shropshire Council chief executive's new book
- 55 **All Change:** Major restructure planned for the Severn Valley Railway
- 66 **Five Minutes With...** Neal Hooper, managing director of Aico, Oswestry

CONSTRUCTION & REGENERATION

Our 11-page special report looks at some of the trends, challenges and opportunities in an industry that is responsible for employing more than 9,000 people across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin



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By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor

SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

This is undoubtedly going to be a tough year for many businesses. The most recent economic survey from Shropshire Chamber of Commerce talks of imminent job losses, mounting fears over taxation levels, and employers operating in 'survival mode'.

It's clear that companies are feeling bashed by the Budget, and unable to pass on a rising financial burden to other customers or suppliers who find themselves in the same boat.

Speaking with businesses across many sectors in the run-up to the festive period, there is a great deal of uncertainty about what 2025 has in store. Ongoing global tensions, coupled with the impact of the Government's latest policies, the AI revolution, and inflation which is creeping upwards once again, are seen as a potent cocktail.

But here's why I love the Shropshire business community. In spite of all this turbulence, the vast majority of firms are showing resilience, determination, and focusing on the positives.

If you're getting frazzled by the challenges which lie ahead, take inspiration from the words of Chris McCausland. The first blind winner of Strictly Come Dancing dedicated his victory to anyone who 'got told or thought that they couldn't do something'.

"It shows that with opportunity, support and determination, that anything can happen," he said.

There may be obstacles on the roads ahead, but that doesn't mean you can't find a way to reach your destination.

We're doing our bit to inject the positives into the new year in this edition, spotlighting a continuing stream of Shropshire businesses celebrating awards recognition – and previewing the launch of this year's big county

awards which are celebrating their silver anniversary.

And as our cover story shows, there's certainly no shortage of support and creative thinking for companies looking to diversify or grow.

For our first special report of 2025, we're turning the spotlight on construction and regeneration, which has such a crucial role to play if our economy is to expand and thrive to help the Government meet its economic targets.

Just look at the numbers: construction businesses employ some 9,000 people across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin – that's over 5% of the entire workforce. For every pound spent on the sector, the CBI-backed economic multiplier shows a three-fold benefit to the county.

And there is much to discuss locally right now, from the Government's review of the green belt to identify 'grey belt' development sites, and key infrastructure projects like Telford's Station Quarter, the Riverside development in Shrewsbury . . . and of course the controversial North West Relief Road.

We're fortunate to have some real construction industry powerhouses in Shropshire, including our friends at McPhillips who have kindly sponsored this special report, having just celebrated their 60th birthday.

As usual, our expert columnists tackle a broad range of hot topics. This time, the menu includes the art of mastering Google Ads and SEO, top tips to stay up to speed with changing legislation, and much more.

If you've got a point to make, a success story to tell, or advice to share among local employers, please do get in touch. We want Shropshire Business magazine to continue painting a picture of what's happening in all corners of the county, and to be talking about the issues that matter to you.

Thank you for your continuing support. Let's all roll up our sleeves and embrace whatever the year has in store.

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Shropshire Business Magazine





A modern co-working space for working professionals, surrounded by greenery and natural light – is this the workplace of 2025?

2025: The year we return to our offices?

Employers want staff to spend more time in the office – but do they understand how an office environment needs to look in 2025? ADAM PRINGLE reports

The way we work is continuing to change. The idea of a nine-to-five job, working Monday to Friday with every weekend and Bank Holiday off, is now the exception rather than the norm.

But that's not to say Shropshire workers should abandon the idea of spending time in the office... quite the opposite, in fact.

Two thirds of chief executives say workers will be expected to spend much more time in the office this year, not less – and that poses more of an emotional challenge to some generations than others.

From Google and Goldman Sachs, Disney, Boots, Barclays and Tesla, some of the world's top brands are already introducing post-pandemic return-to-office mandates.

Kevin Ellis, the departing boss of corporate giant PWC, made headlines when he claimed younger 'Gen Z' employees should work from the office more to 'get ahead' in the AI era.

But the question employers must wrestle with at the start of 2025 is this: is a return-to-office mandate the answer, or could it hamper the retention of Gen Z workers at a time when securing and keeping good staff in Shropshire is still a challenge?

As we revealed in the last issue, 30% of the Shropshire workforce will belong to Gen-Z by the



David Banaghan from Occupop

end of this decade, so we ignore their needs at our peril.

Recruitment software experts Occupop have been exploring how businesses can better understand their Gen Z employees, with the aim to retain, nurture and grow their skillsets.

Gen Z and the AI Revolution

The AI revolution continues apace, with the same survey reporting that 42% of UK bosses have implemented AI technology within the past year.

Machines now handle routine tasks, leaving humans to focus on higher value work.

From chatbots handling customer enquiries to algorithms analysing data patterns, AI permeates various aspects of business, particularly within the legal, financial and IT sectors.

Gen Z, often cited as being born from 1997 onwards, is a native of a fully digital world.

They crave autonomy, value rapid career progression and seek instant feedback. Their affinity for remote work and digital connectivity shapes their workplace expectations.

However, perhaps due to their tech literacy, 52% of Gen Z workers claimed to be worried about AI compared to Millennials (45%) and Gen X (33%).

As Shropshire companies across multiple sectors grapple with the return-to-office decision, the Gen Z perspective is crucial, they say.

What are Gen Z's workplace priorities?

Understanding Gen Z will be crucial to tapering your return-to-work strategy.

Gen Z thrives in environments that offer autonomy, which may predispose them to remote working. Remote work provides the



Rachel Kili says we all need to 'make sitting count' when we're in the office

flexibility they desire, allowing them to balance their personal and professional lives effectively.

Gen Z also expects seamless digital experiences. They value tools that enhance collaboration, communication, and knowledge sharing. Organisations must invest in technology that aligns with their preferences – whether remotely or in the office.

Gen Z also seeks continuous learning and skill development, with 76% seeing learning as key to their professional advancement. Employers should provide mentorship, training programmes, and pathways for career advancement.

Crafting a Gen Z-Centric Return-to-Office Policy

David Banaghan, co-founder and interim chief executive at Occupop, says: "Now worth an estimated £16.8 billion to the UK economy, it's important businesses act fast on the topic of AI.

"While a five-day office-based routine may best reap the benefits of this, return-to-office policies should also reflect empathy, flexibility, and a commitment to nurturing young talent.

"As businesses navigate this transformative period, try to prioritise both technological advancement and the well-being of our youngest workforce members."

Here are some points he recommends Shropshire employers should consider, to get the best out of Gen-Z staff:

- **Flexibility First:** Employers are likely best blending in-person and remote work to accommodate Gen Z's preferences. Consider outcome-based metrics to evaluate performance based on results, not hours spent in the office.

- **Tech-Driven Solutions:** Digital Collaboration Tools are key to Gen Z's communications style. Invest in platforms that facilitate virtual teamwork. Rather than looking externally, place pride in upskilling. Offer online

courses and certifications to nurture Gen Z's skills and lust for learning.

- **Mentorship Programmes:** If you are looking to return to a five-day week, provide structured guidance, such as formal mentorship programmes that bridge generational gaps. Consider 'reverse mentorship' initiatives, too, which allows Gen Z to mentor older colleagues on digital trends.

As the workforce of the future, Gen Z should be consulted on return-to-office mandates – that's what the experts say.

They predict a rise in the number of wellness-focused features in offices, with dedicated quiet zones where workers feel they can relax, recharge, and focus in a calm space.

And they say that the work day shouldn't be confined to a desk; regular movement, a change of scenery, and fresh air significantly impact both mental and physical health.

Fixed desks and rigid office layouts are a thing of the past. If they have not done so already, companies will need to consider flexible and adaptable workplaces with dynamic work stations that suit people's hybrid working patterns.

This is something that Rachel Kili certainly buys into. The physiotherapy expert from Habberley, near Shrewsbury, is running a 'Make Sitting Count' course at the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce offices in Telford on January 28.

She says: "Countering the ill effects of sitting all day is not just about exercising or moving more – it's about understanding and applying how we've evolved to thrive, the biomechanics and physiology of alignment and movement, to power and protect our body and brain, while we sit. I specialise in physiotherapy through movement.

"My unique approach Simply Move!, founded in human evolution, gives you the tools to take

care of your bones, joints, and muscles as you go about your day.

"Stiffness and pain in your back, knee, shoulders or anywhere else is more than just a 'pain in the neck'. Seeking treatment can be a hassle and costly – both in terms of finance and time."

Before the pandemic, the idea of working from home in any capacity was relatively unheard of. By 2022, however, the Office for National Statistics found that a quarter of us worked from home at least some of the time.

And yet, two thirds of professional services firms in the UK have stated that new job adverts will no longer feature the option of being 'fully-remote.'

The decision, according to business leaders, is to encourage professionals to come back into the office – with close to half of hiring managers stating that they are 'willing to wait' for the right applicant who is able to commute into the office.

The findings – from a survey by talent solutions business Robert Walters – come amidst an all-time low in the number of fully-remote job adverts posted in the UK.

According to data from LinkedIn, the share of remote positions posted on the job site has plummeted in the last 12 months. In the UK, remote job postings have dipped more than 13% since this time last year – higher than in Germany, France, and the Netherlands.

Gerrit Bouckaert, chief executive of Robert Walters, says: "Looking back to the jobs market a few years ago and employers were desperate for talent as they tried to navigate the post-pandemic bounce back. Companies were forced to meet applicants' demands – which included accommodating remote work.

"Fast forward, and the power dynamic has shifted back in favour of employers – who have introduced a range of changes including true flexibility in hours, hybrid working, office refurbishments, enhanced digital infrastructure, as well as endless soft perks such as free lunches. With that, employers want some give and take – and it seems the 'take' is fully remote working.

"While I am a complete advocate for management leading from the front, a 'one size fits all approach' to working practices does not lend itself well to diversity or inclusion.

"For example, with hybrid (or remote) working, managers who are working parents or carers get to reap the benefits of increased time with family while continuing to do their job effectively. Forcing them back into the office could be a significant disruption to their family life – both personally and financially if you consider childcare.

"The desire for companies to push for a return-to-office is born from economic instability and stalling growth. Employers are looking at ways they can improve their productivity and output – one of these being to go back to ways of working when 'times were good.'

"However, in the increasing age of global-working and digital proficiency, employers need to ensure they consider all the options available rather than returning immediately to the past for the answers."

● **What's your policy? Are you now insisting that staff spend more time in the office, or has the pandemic changed your working practices for ever, in a way that will never be reversed? Send your views to editor@shropshirebiz.com**

Flaxmill second floor tenants

Marley Risk Consultants – a firm of niche loss adjusting and claims management specialists – has signed a deal to take on the entire second floor of the revamped Flaxmill Maltings building in Shrewsbury.

It is the latest in a series of businesses to take office suite space at the historic building since it was rescued and refurbished by Historic England.

The site had been closed for the past 35 years, but four of the eight listed buildings in the complex – including the Main Mill – are now restored.

The world's first iron-framed building and forerunner of the modern-day skyscraper, the Main Mill provides more than 25,000 sq ft of converted office space over four floors.

The suites include many period features, reflecting the building's industrial heritage, while also providing a modern working environment.

Marley Risk Consultants is the UK's largest specialist in latent defect insurance claims management, working with a range of insurers in this market.

They are relocating to the Flaxmill Maltings from the company's current headquarters at Longbow Close in Shrewsbury.

David Robinson, chief technical officer, said: "It is great to be playing a part in the repurposing of such a landmark building helping to give it a new lease of life while giving us room to grow.

"The flexibility of undertaking the fitting out ourselves to meet Historic England's requirements will result in an office which meets our needs and which will give our staff a fantastic space to work in."

"This is a record letting for Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings," said Toby Shaw, a partner at letting agents Towler Shaw Roberts.

"Marley Risk Consultants are taking the whole second floor in the Main Mill – a 6,500 sq ft suite, being one of the most significant lettings for Shrewsbury in recent times.

"We have let the whole of the first floor to a range of companies, and



Pictured: from left, Toby Shaw from Towler Shaw Roberts, Geraint Roberts and David Robinson from Marley Risk Consultants, David Coxill from Pavé Aways, and Phil Richens from Historic England

we have also received strong enquiries for the third and fourth floors.

"It further underlines the appeal of the office suites at Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings, which offer a unique and attractive work space for businesses and individuals."

Alastair Godfrey, project lead for Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings at Historic England, said: "We are pleased to welcome Marley Risk Consultants to the Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings.

"This Grade I listed building offers a blend of historic character and modern functionality, making it an excellent environment for Marley's staff.

"The Main Mill's industrial heritage, combined with state-of-the-art office amenities, will provide an inspiring backdrop for their work. We believe their tenancy will make a valuable contribution to the ongoing revitalisation of this important landmark, while offering Marley a distinctive and stimulating workplace."

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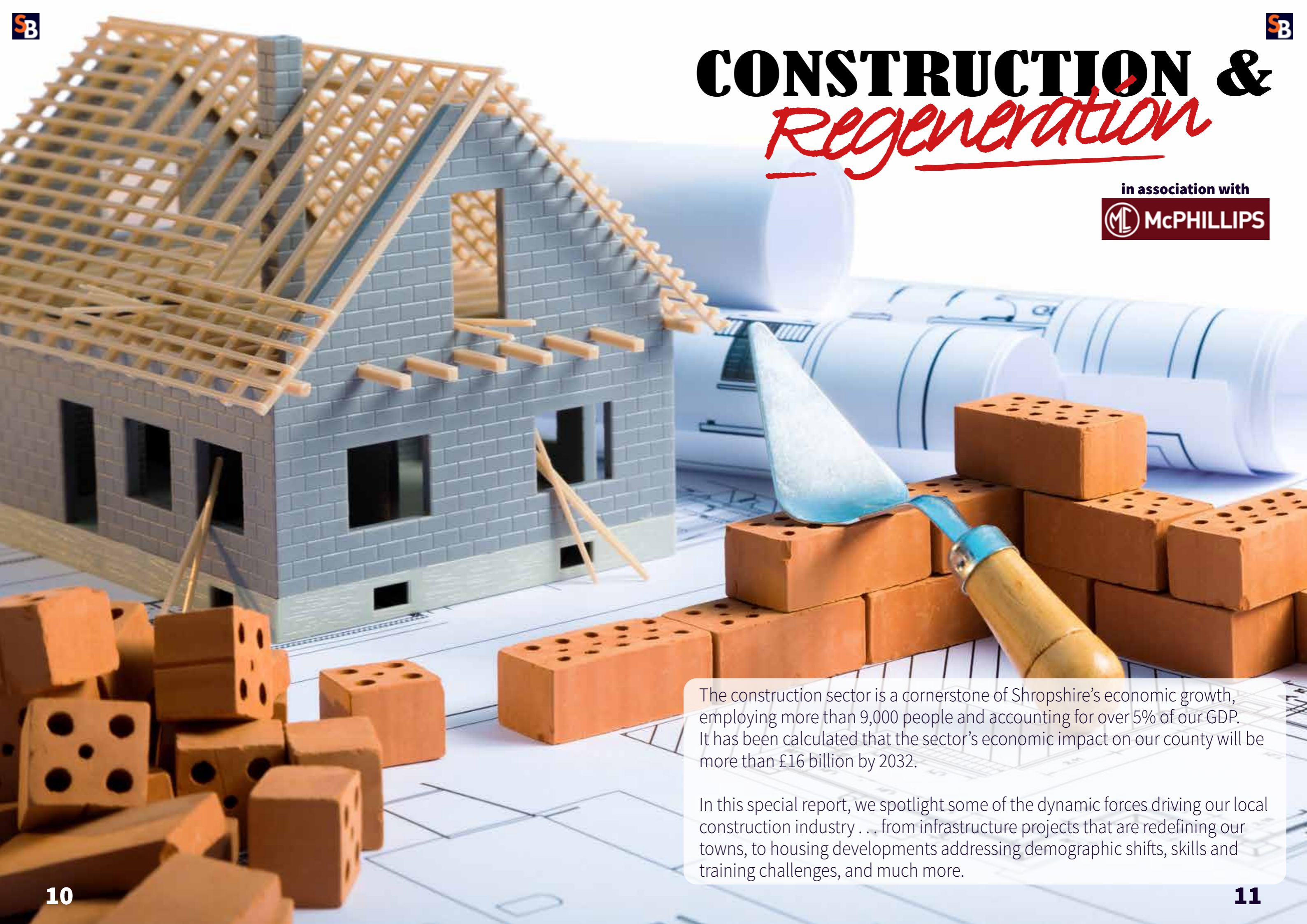
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The construction sector is a cornerstone of Shropshire's economic growth, employing more than 9,000 people and accounting for over 5% of our GDP. It has been calculated that the sector's economic impact on our county will be more than £16 billion by 2032.

In this special report, we spotlight some of the dynamic forces driving our local construction industry . . . from infrastructure projects that are redefining our towns, to housing developments addressing demographic shifts, skills and training challenges, and much more.

Building promising careers

A vibrant economy needs a booming construction sector – and there is certainly no shortage of activity across our county. CARL JONES reports.

Let's start with the numbers. More than one in every 10 jobs across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin is either involved in, or reliant upon, the construction sector.

For every £1 generated, its benefit to our economy is multiplied threefold. And by 2032, CBI-backed figures calculate that it will be worth more than £19 billion to our county.

On that sort of evidence, it seems that the Government's much-vaunted strategy for growth cannot possibly be achieved without a vibrant construction industry.

Nor, indeed, can it happen without a large enough workforce. According to the Home Builders Federation, an additional 152,000 construction workers will need to be found to meet these targets.

Here in Shropshire, there are some really good examples of business working closely with education to help encourage a new generation into the industry.

For example, Shrewsbury-based R1 Construction has partnered with Telford College to provide work experience for 18 students who are spending time at its Webb Crescent development in Dawley, where work is under way for The Wrekin Housing Group.

And a flagship 'Built By You' partnership between the college, Telford & Wrekin Council, and national housebuilder Lovell, is also proving a huge success.

It offers four-week programmes for people aged 16 and above who are not in work, with a guaranteed job interview at the end of the process for everyone who completes their studies.

When it comes to infrastructure projects in 2025, they don't come much bigger – or much more controversial – than the long-discussed North West Relief Road in Shrewsbury.

Another public consultation has been launched by Shropshire Council, this time to consider a revised carbon impact assessment. The public has until January 17 to register comments.

Why has this come about? The Department for Transport has changed the carbon assessment process for the preparation of all major transport schemes, to consider a wider range of carbon-generating activities.

It means the road is deemed to have a larger carbon footprint than previously estimated – although the council has committed to an equivalent increase in carbon offsetting, to mitigate any potential impact.

When Shropshire Chamber of Commerce last surveyed its members, a significant majority were in favour of the North West Relief Road – but there remains significant opposition to the scheme in many quarters.



The 'Built By You' partnership involving Lovell, Telford & Wrekin Council and Telford College provides construction training and a guaranteed job interview



The latest consultation over the North West Relief Road ends on January 17



Morris Property director Chris Morris at Stadium Point in Shrewsbury

A less controversial infrastructure project in Shrewsbury, meanwhile, is on target to be finished for the summer.

Work to enhance and improve the Shrewsbury railway station gyratory area includes connecting Castle Gates, Chester Street, Smithfield Road and Cross Street, along with areas to the north and south.

Paving and kerbing work will be done on new pedestrian crossings at Castle Foregate, Smithfield Road and the railway station exit, as part of a wider plan to redesign key areas of the town.

The 'station quarter' work, which is Government-funded, is being carried out by McPhillips Ltd on behalf of the local authority.

But by far the highest profile infrastructure project in Shrewsbury right now is the exciting Riverside regeneration.

Led by the council and its development manager RivingtonHark, Smithfield Riverside will transform the area between the River Severn, the Darwin Centre and Roushill.

Demolition of the Riverside shopping centre and former Riverside medical practice has been going on for several months, and construction

of a new public park alongside Roushill is due to begin soon.

A second 'outline' planning application has also now been submitted to secure the principle of development for three key plots between Smithfield Road, Raven Meadows and the new park on Roushill.

The application took on board the results of a public consultation, which saw around 3,000 people engage online.

In response to the feedback, the proposals add greater flexibility for the three sites, allowing for a complementary mix of residential, office and hotel uses. An expanded area of public realm has also been added to better connect the plots, while the maximum building height for the plots has been reduced by one storey to minimise the impact on the Shrewsbury skyline.

When it comes to housing, we can expect to see a great deal of activity across our county this year. The Government's pledge to deliver 1.5 million new homes over the next five years includes the reclassification of some green belt land to create a 'grey belt' where homes can be built.

The official definition of this is "poor quality



Representatives from Shropshire Rural Housing, Shropshire Council, SJ Roberts Construction and Powis Estates at the Chirbury development site



Ange Jones, Jordan Bannister, Jack Brothwood, Alfie Turner, Cameron Whyte, Noel Hesbrook, Stephen Corbett, and Gill Price at Webb Crescent in Dawley

and ugly areas" of the green belt, which is designed to limit the growth of large built-up areas, and stop towns from merging into one another.

The green belt currently covers around 8% of land in Shropshire, and house building plans are already proving controversial in places like Albrighton, where a campaign group is fighting proposals for 800 new homes.

Charlie Blakemore, co-chair of the Albrighton Village Action Group, says: "More than 1,100 residents have taken time to lodge their objections, which clearly shows the level of deep feeling in the community that the location, and scale of this speculative proposal, is just not right."

At the opposite side of the county, partners have got together to celebrate the start of a less controversial project for new affordable homes in Chirbury.

These properties will be for social rent, with priority being given to local people who want to remain living in their community.

Shropshire Rural Housing Association is leading the project in conjunction with landowners Powis Estates, with SJ Roberts Construction undertaking the building work. The first phase of the project to clear the site has been completed.

John Green, chief executive of Shropshire Rural Housing, says: "The development is already having a positive impact on the local economy with workers using the local shop and cafe, and everyone is excited as progress continues."

SJ Roberts Construction director Matthew Roberts anticipates the first timber frames, manufactured by its sister company Lowfield Timber Frames, being erected in February.

In Telford, work to expand Ercall Wood Academy is progressing well, with almost a third of the project now complete.

The expansion of the Wellington secondary school, which is run by the Learning Community Trust, will enable an additional 60 pupils to attend from September and, over time, will help pupil numbers to grow from 900 to 1,200.

A new three-storey teaching block, which will focus on science, is on course to be finished by the summer.

Shropshire is rich in heritage, and many construction projects are currently focusing on



Plans to build 800 new homes on green belt land in Albrighton have provoked more than 1,000 objections

giving historic buildings a new lease of life.

One of these is in the village of Norton, between Bridgnorth and Telford, where a former Victorian blacksmith's workshop is being transformed into a modern eco home.

The Old Smithy, dating back to the 1880s, will be 'sensitively transformed' into a three-bedroom home in one of a number of projects that will see heritage buildings transformed across the Apley Estate, and it stands adjacent to a row of four eco homes in Village Road that were recently added to a national network of low carbon homes.

Estate director Graeme Manton says the project will 'breathe new life back into this historic building' and provide much-needed housing for those who want to live and work in the village.

"The purpose of this adaptation of the Old Smithy is to preserve the future economic viability of existing buildings within historic settings – in terms of sensitive current enhancement and future condition."

BCHN Architects, based in Shrewsbury, is behind the proposals and says the plans will 'create a thoughtful juxtaposition between old and new'.

In Wellington, the historic former YMCA building at Walker Street is being fully restored to create nine upper floor apartments and refurbished ground floor retail space.

The apartments on the upper floors are being developed by Nuplace, Telford & Wrekin Council's wholly-owned housing company.

The council has been successful in securing

over £12 million in government funding from the Towns Fund and Capital Regeneration Programme, plus additional match funding, to deliver this and a series of other projects in the Wellington conservation area to boost the retail, leisure and hospitality offering in the town.

And in Gobowen, a Shropshire landscaping company has been building a special community garden for paediatric patients at the Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital, where around £200,000 has been raised to pay for landscaping and infrastructure, along with a glass building for patients to undertake school work or play sessions.

The eight-week 'Garden For Alice' project has been overseen by Butler Landscapes based in Tern Hill, near Market Drayton.

This looks set to be a busy year for Morris Property with more than 50 acres of land under development and a range of private construction contracts across the commercial, education and heritage sector across the county.

Last year the team had the green light to develop its 28-acre site 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 ever development. The first tenants will move in this year as Zone 1 comes to life with office, food and commercial tenants.

In Telford, work is about to start on a 20,000 sq ft food retail store on part of the site known as Ketley Point, former home of the Shropshire Star. It follows the announcement of a 45,000 sq ft industrial unit coming to market on the same site.

Projects in the education sector include a purpose-built nursery for children in Oakengates which will complete in spring, and a new boarding residence and sports hall at Concord College in Shrewsbury.

In the south of the county, specialist skills are being utilised at the Upper Norton Holiday and Leisure Complex where four large barns are being converted to create 15, high quality holiday lets, a bespoke indoor pool and sauna/steam room.

"In 2025, we will be working towards Considerate Constructor Status across all our sites," said Morris Property director Chris Morris. "We are aware embracing innovation helps us to stay ahead of the competition."



Working to create a resilient local economy

A vision for Shrewsbury – how the Smithfield Riverside plan could look

AMY BOULD is a committee member of Shropshire Constructing Excellence and managing director of strategic communications specialist Be Bold.



There are more than 19,000 words in the ‘Invest 2035: the UK’s modern industrial strategy’ green paper.

Do you want to have a guess at how many times the Government used the word ‘construction’?
Zero. Yes, that’s right. Not once.*
Yet there is not one single aspect of a successful industrial strategy which won’t involve this core sector of vital importance to UK plc.
Perhaps that’s why the two major events delivered by Shropshire Constructing Excellence in 2024 were so successful, so well-attended and saw so much engagement from large contractors to SME supply chain companies alike.
It seems that if we don’t stand together to advocate for the construction industry ourselves, we’ll be consigned to a position of merely a supporting sector, when actually we’re the engine of the much-vaunted growth the Chancellor wants to see.
In fairness, the Government has since perhaps realised that to announce 1.5 million new homes and 150 infrastructure projects without a plan to support an industry facing significant headwinds was a mistake.
They may have recently binned T-levels, but they have announced regional skills hubs to help develop skills and committed to making sure SMEs can access more public contracts through the much-delayed Procurement Act coming online this year.
These were among the key themes coming out of SCE’s events against a backdrop of significant challenges, from high interest rates



Katherine Kynaston talking at the Theatre Severn event

and material costs to labour shortages and declining planning approvals.
That’s why the transformation of Shropshire Constructing Excellence (SCE) into the Shropshire club of Constructing Excellence Midlands in 2024 was a timely and significant milestone – opening doors to enhanced knowledge sharing and networking opportunities which will benefit businesses across the county at a time when such support is crucial.
This evolution of SCE couldn’t have come at a more critical moment for the sector. At the March event, Mark Barrow, former chair of Shropshire Constructing Excellence who has

since stepped down as he left his day job at Shropshire Council, set out a pipeline of projects planned by 2032, totalling £5.58 billion across housing, transportation, education, health and environmental initiatives.
With an estimated potential economic impact of £16.29 billion, these developments represent unprecedented opportunities for local businesses, offering a beacon of hope amid broader market uncertainties.
I hosted March’s Project Pipeline event at Theatre Severn which attracted more than 100 business representatives, while November’s Meet the Buyer event at Telford College saw similar attendance levels.
Both events highlighted the construction sector’s vital role in Shropshire’s economic development and its enthusiasm for securing a share of upcoming major projects.
The Meet the Buyer event, in particular, showcased how the sector is embracing a more collaborative approach to overcome current challenges.
By bringing together sub-contractors and supply chain businesses with leading contractors and public sector procurement teams, it created a platform for meaningful dialogue about upcoming opportunities.
Major developments such as Shrewsbury’s Riverside regeneration and Telford’s Station Quarter were put firmly in the spotlight, with local businesses eager to understand how they can participate in shaping the region’s future.
However, securing work in this evolving landscape requires more than just technical capability.
The implementation of the UK Procurement Act brings new considerations that businesses must prepare for. Social value will become a mandatory element in public sector procurement, with a minimum of 10% of each procurement’s total award criteria dedicated to social value outcomes.
This shift towards social value isn’t just a box-ticking exercise – it represents a fundamental



Station Quarter is changing the Telford skyline



More than 100 business representatives attended Project Pipeline

change in how construction projects deliver benefits to local communities.
Businesses will need to demonstrate how they create jobs, provide training opportunities, support local supply chains, and contribute to environmental sustainability.
The successful delivery of social value commitments will be monitored through key performance indicators, with transparency requirements for contracts over £5 million.
The good news is that support is available. Through its new connection with Constructing Excellence Midlands, SCE is better positioned than ever to help local businesses navigate these changes.
Looking ahead, the construction sector’s role in Shropshire’s economic growth cannot be overstated. The pipeline of projects represents more than just building work – it’s about creating sustainable communities, generating



SCE is opening doors to knowledge sharing and networking opportunities

employment opportunities, and building a resilient local economy. The success of these projects will depend on the sector’s ability to work collaboratively, embrace new procurement requirements, and deliver meaningful social value.
As we move into 2025, SCE’s alignment with Constructing Excellence Midlands provides our local businesses with the perfect platform to access wider networks, share best practices, and collectively address the challenges ahead.
The message from SCE is clear: while the broader construction sector faces significant headwinds, opportunities abound in Shropshire for those willing to adapt and collaborate. If you’d like to know more, visit www.cemidlands.org/clubs/shropshire
(unless you count ‘pre-construction’, ironically in a sentence about the amount of time projects remain in this phase.)*



The groundworks training area at Telford College



Yorks Bridge in Walsall



Working at Dudley Road in Birmingham

Kai's diary of works

What's it like to be an apprentice in the construction industry? KAI GINIFER has been keeping a diary since he joined McPhillips over a year ago. In this final chapter, he discusses his most recent on-site experiences as he prepares to make the move to a full-time role.

I agreed to write a diary about what it's like being an apprentice in the hope that it might inspire others to check out this route into construction.

I've been with McPhillips for over a year now. As an apprentice I have been spending three weeks a month on site and one week at Telford College studying towards an NVQ Level 2 in Construction Operations.

These are some of the projects I've been involved with over the past few weeks.

Dudley Road, Birmingham

We're well into phase three of our works on the Dudley Road Improvement Scheme. Overall, the scheme will deliver upgraded facilities for pedestrians and cyclists, new bus lanes and reduced traffic congestion.

I've been digging the WPD ducting. You dig down to 850mm deep for the top of the tarmac to lay four ducts with 750mm covers. Then apply sand and warning tape over the top, stone backfill in the layers and use the whacker-plate to compact.

More digging, this time for the kerb race. Digging down to the top of the services, the level depends on whether we stone up for



Kai Ginifer kept a diary of the projects he worked on

a normal 200mm kerb race thickness, or overpour with concrete. We use steel pins for a smooth race. The engineer sets out the pins for the string line. You dip down the string line for 250mm to allow for the kerb and lay a bed of screed.

Yorks Bridge, Walsall

A change of scene for a while. We're building a new bridge which will carry Norton Road over the Wyrley & Essington Canal north of Pelsall.

I helped divert a small 32mm water main. We cut it off at both ends, used reels of new pipe to bury and connect, dug a long trench,

laid the new pipe in and applied warning tape over it. We then used the laser to maintain the correct measurement of 1.1m the whole length through. This was then filled in and levelled off with topsoil.

I've also been helping out with organising things in the site office.

Files and folders always need to be up to date. I made sure all sections of the job contained the correct permits, plans, surveys and drawings, as well as risk assessments, toolbox talks and method statements. Deliveries of signage, raw materials, posters and more need to be accounted for and stored correctly. I've also been looking after some of this work too.

Telford College, Wellington campus

We finished all our preparatory work – collating job hours, photo evidence, job cards, write ups and testimonies, all of which goes into our portfolios for review. Next up were the exams! We should receive our results in December.

This was my final diary entry as I am no longer an apprentice. I'm moving into a full-time role. If my diary has inspired just one person to consider an apprenticeship it will have been worthwhile.



Kyle Shaw is the first Telford College bricklaying student to score 100% for this exam

Students on course for success

Bricklaying students at Telford College are celebrating a 100% pass rate in their latest exams.

More than three quarters of the 20-strong group achieved either a merit or a distinction in their 'principles of building construction' test – with one student recording a perfect score.

The 100% score was recorded by 17-year-old Kyle Shaw, who became the first Telford College bricklaying student to ever achieve maximum marks in this exam.

The former Telford Priory School student said: "I thought at the end of the exam that I might be on for a pretty good mark, but when I found out I'd got 100% I was really proud of myself. The work I have put in has paid off."

He added: "To anyone considering enrolling on this bricklaying course at Telford College, I'd say it will really suit you if you are a more practically-based person. There is written work too, though, and you have to learn a lot of theory behind the jobs that we do."



McPhillips began work on the £20 million retirement community in Newport in Autumn 2024



McPhillips Community Fund will announce its first grants in Spring 2025

Why doing the right thing pays dividends

In an industry facing unprecedented challenges, Shropshire's largest construction company is proving that investing in people and the planet isn't just the right thing to do – it's good for business too.

McPhillips (Wellington) Ltd managing director Paul Inions believes the company's distinctive approach has been key to its longevity and success.

"It's the McPhillips way. As a leadership team, we understand we're carrying forward something special here. We have a responsibility to everyone who's been part of our journey over six decades to build on these foundations," he explains.

Those foundations are significant. Since its founding in 1964, McPhillips has delivered more than £1 billion of contracts, with 140 projects worth over £300 million completed in the past five years alone.

Current flagship schemes include the Heart of Africa development at Chester Zoo and major infrastructure projects across Shropshire, the Midlands and North West, including Oswestry Innovation Park, the Riverside in Shrewsbury and Station Quarter in Telford.

The company is now setting its sights on ambitious environmental targets, with 2025 marking a step-change in its approach to sustainability.

"Sustainability isn't just an add-on for us – it's fundamental to how we approach every project and decision. We're making substantial investments throughout 2025 to develop our carbon reduction strategy, working hand-in-hand with our supply chain to create meaningful progress towards net zero."



Paul Inions, managing director of McPhillips

The company's commitment to quality and innovation has already been recognised with multiple industry accolades, including 26 consecutive RoSPA gold awards or higher for health and safety excellence. This track record of maintaining high standards puts it in good stead as it tackles environmental challenges.

But what really distinguishes McPhillips is its approach to people. More than 20 per cent of its direct workforce started as apprentices, and many team members have been with the business for more than two decades.

"Yes, there are extra costs involved when you directly employ your workforce rather than rely on subcontractors, but we believe it's fundamental to addressing the industry's challenges. We need skilled people, the sector needs those skills too."

"When you're a company like ours, which has significant expertise and experience across diverse sectors, both in civil engineering and construction, we will always look for ways to maintain our order book across diverse sectors and insulate the company from the cyclical ups and downs of each of them."

This 2025 strategy is also underpinned by a newly-launched community fund, delivered in partnership with Shropshire Community Foundation, supporting innovative local projects that improve mental health and wellbeing.

"Our roots in this region run deep – with over 80 per cent of our team living within 20 miles of our Telford base. They're raising their families here, supporting local schools, and building their futures in this community. That's why our new community fund isn't just another initiative – it's about making a real difference in the places where our people live and work."

As the company moves into 2025 with a strong order book, Inions believes this integrated approach to social and environmental responsibility will be crucial to delivering the next chapter in McPhillips' story.

With construction industry forecasts predicting growth of 2.5% in 2025 and 3.8% in 2026, the company appears well-positioned to capitalise on opportunities while maintaining its distinctive approach to business.

"Looking back over six decades gives you perspective," he reflects. "Every achievement we're celebrating today is built on the dedication of people who've been part of our story since 1964."

The 'McPhillips way' of doing things is investing in people, maintaining high standards, and contributing to environmental and community wellbeing. As six decades of success demonstrate, sometimes doing the right thing is also doing the smart thing too.

Investing in Telford and Wrekin

Laying firm foundations for the future



Evolving – Station Quarter, Telford Town Centre

1 Walker Street, Wellington, is being restored

All-new frontages – Limes Walk, Oakengates

Telford and Wrekin is undergoing an exciting chapter in the transformation of its borough towns.

The regeneration projects in Telford Town Centre, Wellington and Oakengates, which are all being delivered at pace, are laying foundations for the future – creating opportunities for people to learn new skills, secure great jobs, enjoy top cultural activities and live in an attractive place.

Station Quarter

In Telford Town Centre, the ambitious Station Quarter development is rapidly taking shape.

This visionary project is not just about buildings but about creating spaces that inspire, connect, and fuel economic growth.

At the heart of this development is The Quad – a modern digital skills and enterprise hub that represents the future of Telford and a place for education, business, and innovation to thrive.

The Quad, which opened in September, is already serving as a central community meeting point, providing state-of-the-art facilities that support Harper Adams University and Telford College students, start-up businesses and residents alike.

The Quad will support more than 300 students annually, providing vital training in emerging industries like AI, robotics, automation, mechatronic engineering and advanced manufacturing.

In addition to education, work to create 189 new residential homes at Station Quarter is underway, creating town centre living and breathing new life into the heart of Telford Town Centre.

117 homes are being developed by Nuplace, Telford & Wrekin Council's wholly owned housing company, alongside 72 affordable homes.

Nuplace have successfully secured £4.725m of grant funding from WMCA (West Midlands Combined Authority) to support the delivery of this scheme.

The affordable homes will include 36 rented properties and 36 will be shared ownership while the Nuplace properties are being developed for private rent.

The integration of education and housing within Station Quarter is driving investment, attracting businesses and providing the infrastructure to support a growing workforce.

This education-led regeneration marks another important step for Telford, with higher and further education at the forefront of the town's economic growth agenda.

Wellington

In Wellington, the Council successfully secured over £12m in government funding from the Towns Fund and Capital Regeneration Programme, plus additional match funding, to deliver a series of projects in the Wellington conservation area and other parts of the town

to boost the retail, leisure and hospitality offering. They include the redevelopment of the historic 1 Walker Street building which is being fully restored to create nine upper floor apartments and refurbished ground floor retail space. The apartments on the upper floors are being developed by Nuplace, Telford & Wrekin Council's wholly owned housing company.

Other projects in Wellington include the acquisition and restoration of Wellington's historic market and the further refurbishment of the Wellington Orbit cinema to enhance these assets as key community and cultural hubs.

Funding is also delivering public realm improvements to improve the overall look and feel of the town as well as more high quality living accommodation and improved commercial spaces.

Oakengates

In Oakengates the town centre is being transformed and dated 1960s retail units are being converted into modern retail units with new residential units above in the area between the theatre in Oakengates and The Wakes.

This includes Limes Walk, where the shop frontages and units have been refurbished to make it a more attractive space for shoppers and increase footfall.

Alongside the conversion works, extensive improvements have been made to the fabric of the buildings including the installation of solar panels resulting in significantly improved energy efficiency ratings.

Meanwhile Telford Theatre is being completely remodelled to support the ongoing regeneration of Oakengates town centre in a £21.07 million project – funded by the UK government and topped up with funding from Telford & Wrekin Council.

The majority of the theatre is being completely rebuilt, transforming the exterior and interior of the theatre and creating a new customer experience.

Councillor Lee Carter, Telford & Wrekin Council Leader, said: "Investing in Telford and Wrekin through these regeneration projects in our borough towns will attract new investment, create jobs, and ensure that Telford remains a destination for both businesses and families which we can be extremely proud of."

"At Station Quarter, creating an environment where students, businesses, and residents thrive together, is poised to deliver significant economic rewards for the local community, while positioning Telford as a leader in the Midlands' future growth."

"Meanwhile, in Oakengates and Wellington we're revitalising and some of our most historic buildings – creating town centre living, new retail spaces and thriving and vibrant community and cultural hubs where people can socialise."

• You can find out about all these regeneration projects at: www.telford.gov.uk/investingintelfordandwrekin

Telford and Shropshire

PREMIER COMMERCIAL SPACES

BUILT & DEVELOPED BY

MORRIS
PROPERTY



Stadium Point Business Park



Ketley Point



Upper Norton Barns



Oakengates Nursery

OFFICES, WAREHOUSING & DISTRIBUTION

With an expanding portfolio of property and experience in Telford and Shropshire, we're helping the area grow in more ways than one.

From property investment and management to new build residential and commercial developments, over the last decade we've built at Telford's T54 Business Park, completed 12 units in Hortonwood and Hortonwood West for Telford & Wrekin Council and private occupiers, as well as completing the five-acre office and industrial park, Access442. Work is now underway at the 28 acre Stadium Point site on Oteley Road in Shrewsbury.

Investing in Telford and Wrekin
Creating a better borough



Protect, care and invest
to create a better borough



Members of the Construction Skills Advisory Panel at Shrewsbury Colleges Group

Employers are driving the skills debate

Shrewsbury Colleges Group set up a Construction Skills Advisory Panel over a year ago to bring together employers and key stakeholders.

The aim was to ensure that the college produces high quality skills analysis within the sector, that will form a robust evidence-based portfolio for identifying skills and employment priorities in the short and longer term.

What the college gained in addition to these aims, it says, was the significant investment of over £1.5 million awarded as a result of employer support.

The panel currently comprises Morris Property, Shropshire Council, Lime Green, Asset Surfacing, Shropshire Cooling Services, and CQS Solutions.

This group of employers were invited to join as a broad representation of the industry, bringing expertise in contract management, heritage, civil engineering, building services, renewable technologies and surveying.

The full curriculum offer is up for discussion – including apprenticeships, the introduction of T-Levels, the latest in renewable technology, and the changes to higher education, along with the requisite resource needed to deliver across all programmes.

Some of the topics for debate have included:

- The importance of developing young people for the future workforce, ensuring they are work ready
- The often negative image of construction as a career and how to work together to overcome this perception
- The barriers to hiring apprentices with a large sub-contracting workforce
- How best to upskill individuals to progress, improve management skills and quality assurance
- Emerging skills needs, skills shortages and gaps in knowledge
- How to ensure construction teaching staff keep up-to-date

Matt Laws, vice principal for vocational education, and chair of the SAP, said: "It cannot be underestimated the key role employers



Kyle and his winning build



Cai with his winning joinery project

and stakeholders play in ensuring the college remains relevant, current, and responsive to future skills and technology.

"As active members of the Shropshire Construction Training Group, Shropshire Constructing Excellence and with regular contact maintained with the Construction Industry Training Board, the college remains committed to providing the skills and knowledge the construction industry requires."

Two of Shrewsbury Colleges Group's talented apprentices, Kyle Blower and Cai Curtis, secured gold medals at the prestigious SkillBuild competition, which highlights their

exceptional skills and dedication in their respective trades.

Often referred to as the 'Skills Olympics,' it is the largest multi-trade skills competition in the UK, laying out ten challenging events, set over 18 hours in three tough days of competition.

Kyle triumphed in the Bricklaying category, impressing judges with his attention to detail and speed, while Cai excelled in the Carpentry category, showcasing exceptional skill in meeting the tests.

James Staniforth, principal of Shrewsbury Colleges Group, said: "The victories of Kyle and Cai underscore the importance of supporting vocational education and technical skills development in the UK.

"To have one winner from the college would be special, but to win two categories is quite exceptional."

Stuart Raine, curriculum director for construction and building trades at the college, said: "Cai and Kyle's achievements are remarkable, considering that the SkillBuild competition had over 1,000 registrations across ten construction trades and 19 regional heats, with 78 finalists each competing to become a champion of their trade."

Kyle's success is particularly noteworthy as his father, Lee, also won Gold in the WorldSkills competition a few years ago.



Flexible, modern office spaces make for a great place to hold a meeting



European Innovation team – Tim Luft, Megan Wright, Nigel and Jo Birch

Empowering innovation and growth

A business incubator and accelerator specialising in fostering high-growth, technology-driven businesses has exciting plans for 2025 from its new base in Telford

"Our commitment is cultivating a dynamic ecosystem where visionary ideas can thrive and achieve their full potential."

That's the message from a dynamic and ambitious new company which has taken a room with a view – the third floor of The Quad building in Telford's fast-growing Station Quarter.

European Innovation says its mission is to empower entrepreneurs and innovative businesses by providing comprehensive support through business incubation, investment, high growth mentorship, and networking opportunities.

And its strategy for delivering on this is to provide a mixture of tailored resources, expert guidance, and seamless facilitation of key processes, including UK Innovator Visa endorsement to help overseas entrepreneurs gain a foothold in the UK.

The driving forces behind the business are chief executive Tim Luft, and chief operating

officer Nigel Birch, who have decades of top-level experience spanning multiple sectors.

Tim is a digital media entrepreneur specialising in the roll-out of virtual reality. He has led regional innovation programmes for the UK Government and mentors new entrepreneurs while advising the DBT Global Entrepreneur Programme.

He has supported in the establishment of University Institutes which have researched the use of 3D environment for teaching and learning, and continues to mentor entrepreneurs who are developing new ideas. He sits on the Telford Business Board and is also an advisor for the DiT Global Entrepreneur Programme.

Nigel is a leader in innovation, having endorsed over 75 entrepreneurs for the UK's Founder and Innovator Visa. He has held key roles at Fujifilm, Rolls Royce, and Innovate UK while supporting global entrepreneurship and training over 320 businesses.

Previous roles have included six years as international business development director



Nigel Birch – a leader in innovation

at the University of Wolverhampton, where he created a dedicated programme to support global entrepreneurship which helped 50 new businesses start up in South America and Eastern Europe.

He also developed 'Business Success Training Programme' and 'Mental Robustness in Business' programmes for early-stage business start-ups, delivered on behalf of the Oman Educational Department

"European Innovation offers comprehensive services to empower businesses, including expert mentorship, investment opportunities, and state-of-the-art facilities to drive growth and innovation," says Tim.

"It is a dynamic hub dedicated to fostering growth, collaboration, and innovation across diverse industries. Located in a vibrant, modern facility, European Innovation provides flexible office spaces, touchdown workspaces, and fully equipped meeting rooms designed to support professionals, startups, and established companies alike."



The Quad in Telford's Station Quarter. European Innovation has the top floor.

Case studies

Angell's Cakes:

Kiera Atherton, founder of Angell's Cakes, transformed her passion for baking into a successful business in Telford with the help of the UKSPF funded Thrive Telford Business Start Up Service. Through hands-on mentorship, she learned to target her audience, create a solid business plan, and price her products effectively. As Angell's Cakes grows, Kiera plans to expand her skills, attend events, and refine her business strategy to showcase her cakes to a wider audience.

Novocaddy:

In 2020, Joseph Broad's diagnosis of type 1 diabetes led him to create Novocaddy, a cooling case for insulin pens with real-time temperature monitoring via a phone app. With support from the UKSPF funded Thrive Telford Business Start Up Service, Joseph refined his product, focusing on IP protection and market expansion. His journey showcases how entrepreneurial drive, combined with expert guidance, can turn personal challenges into innovative solutions.

Development Appraisals Limited:

Founded by Stephen Hancocks, the business is innovating the construction industry with its 'Proptech' software, designed to bridge the gap between off-the-shelf solutions and custom flexibility. With the support of the UKSPF funded Thrive Telford Business Start Up Service, Stephen refined his value proposition and sales strategy, setting his business on a successful path to market.



The business incubator at The Quad offers flexible office spaces, meeting and conference rooms

◀ "With a focus on creating an environment that inspires creativity and connects like-minded individuals, European Innovation offers a community-driven workspace where businesses can thrive."

From tailored support to networking opportunities, the company says it is committed to empowering its members to innovate, connect, and achieve their goals in an inspiring setting.

European Innovation is already a trusted go-to resource for many leading organisations, including the Department for Business & Trade, West Midlands Combined Authority, the Home Office, Telford & Wrekin Council, Harper Adams University, London North Eastern Railway (LNER), Cosworth, and Aspire Training.

Core services include:

- **Business Incubation** – with the use of high-quality meeting space and infrastructure
- **Business Visas and Relocation** – helping entrepreneurs from all over the globe gain a foothold in the UK
- **Business Mentoring** – including access to a network of Business Angels offering early stage seed investment of between £50,000 and £250,000

- **Business Support Services** – linking with organisations such as Innovate Telford, StartUp Telford, and High Growth Accelerator Programmes

- **Access to Finance** – helping businesses to fuel their growth and success with investment in equity, loans or grants

- **Networking Events** – a regular programme of events offering opportunities to connect, learn and grow with industry leaders and peers

Nigel says: "Our business incubator at The Quad offers flexible office spaces, meeting and conference rooms, and a flexible desk booking system."

"The idea is that we can offer a convenient touchdown space for professionals looking to work in a vibrant innovation centre, whether it's just for a few hours or a regular setup."

"Our flexible, modern workspace is perfect for those seeking a productive environment without long-term commitments."

"Monthly passes are available, providing access to all the essentials you need to work efficiently and connect with like-minded individuals in the heart of our innovation hub."

"If you simply require a business address with a post forwarding service, we are able to offer a full support package on a monthly basis."

He adds: "We are also a UK Home Office approved Endorsing Body for guiding entrepreneurs through the process of securing Startup and Innovator Founder Visas, ensuring a smooth transition to business success in the United Kingdom."

"Working in a consortium of six UK businesses, we bring a combined wealth of experience to assessing business proposals."

"And as a trusted partner of the Home Office, we have a reputation for a quick and efficient service, handling new business

formations, expansions, settlement in the UK, and routes for business scale-up."

As an approved UK Home Office lead for the Founder and Innovator Visa, Nigel has endorsed over 75 entrepreneurs from all over the globe. More than three quarters of these were start-ups.

For early stage companies and established businesses wishing to scale, European Innovation offers a 'Business Gym', which can provide expert guidance and potential investors.

It's a chance to join a community and access the support and investment you need, if you are serious about improving or growing your business.

European Innovation has already helped its clients raise over £5 million in equity, loans, and grants, fuelling their growth and success.

The company's Business Angel Network connects startups with high-net-worth investors, providing critical funding and strategic mentorship, with an annual investment of approximately £3 million.

The team also offers expert grant writing services, helping businesses secure vital funding by crafting compelling proposals that align with funding criteria and maximize chances of success.

Why is innovation important? It allows you to differentiate from competitors by offering unique products, services, or processes. This competitive advantage helps attract customers and retain market share.

Innovative businesses tend to attract top



Andrew Bailey, Governor of the Bank of England, at the European Innovation offices



Office spaces are tastefully furnished and ready to go at The Quad in Station Quarter, Telford

talent who are eager to work in dynamic and forward-thinking environments. A culture of innovation can help you recruit and retain skilled employees, driving further growth and success.

You will also open up new markets and revenue streams by continuously innovating, enabling you to explore untapped opportunities and expand the reach of your products or services. Embracing innovation also enables businesses to diversify and reduce dependence on a single product or market, helping to mitigate risks associated with economic changes.

European Innovation was delighted to host the Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, last year during his visit to Telford, just weeks after the incubator at The Quad had opened for business.

He was keen to gather insights from local employers across Telford, engaging in an open dialogue about the current economic climate and its impact on the workplace.

Tim said: "The session provided an invaluable opportunity for local businesses to share their experiences and offer feedback directly to the central bank, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities present in the region."

"The event showcased Telford's diverse business community and underscored the importance of continued collaboration between local enterprises and national economic leaders."

The Quad's centrally located position, just a short walk from Telford railway station and town centre, make it ideal for hosting networking events, and European Innovation is planning monthly get-togethers this year.

Upcoming themes for the first half of 2025 include funding and investment strategies, marketing and brand building, technology and innovation, leadership and management, and sustainability and corporate social responsibility

Tim says: "These key topics will be discussed with high-quality speakers, providing an opportunity to network with fellow companies and explore opportunities to collaborate."

"It's all part of our ambition to support companies to scale and achieve high growth."

European Innovation

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Support for those with brain injury



Amanda Berry, Amanda Vincent (both Headway Shropshire), Debbie Humphries from Lanyon Bowdler and Sarah Land from Peeps

Charities and professionals who support people living with a brain injury came together to share their experience and expertise at a special event in Telford.

The Brain Injury Networking Forum was hosted by Lanyon Bowdler Solicitors at the firm's Telford office, featuring speakers from charities Headway and Peeps.

The aim of the event was to bring people together who work in the field of brain injury – whether as a healthcare professional, a charity providing support, or a family member of someone affected by a brain trauma. Debbie Humphries, a partner in Lanyon Bowdler's personal injury team, said: "It was a mutually supportive event, with lots of different perspectives in the room, so we discussed various rehabilitation techniques, as well as the challenges of finding the right support at the right time."

Amanda Vincent of Headway said: "We were grateful to Lanyon Bowdler for inviting us to the event, which was a good opportunity to raise awareness of the activities we provide here in Shropshire."

"It was also great to build relationships with fellow charities and professionals which helps all of us continue our work to support people with brain injuries and their families."



IHT tax changes for farmers is a yard stick of government priorities



The gap between vote share and seat share in the last General Election was the most disproportionate on record

Free water for rail travellers

Wenlock Spring has teamed up with Avanti West Coast to roll out water refill points onboard for customers in a first for the railway industry.

The initiative, part of Avanti's wider £450 million investment in its fleet, will see complimentary water available for those who are travelling on any service operated by a Pendolino train.

The water is being supplied by the Church Stretton-based firm, and is sourced from a protected historic spring that dates back to 1086.

Matthew Orme, director at Wenlock Spring, said: "The refill points dispense Wenlock Spring from reusable bottles, which are returned to us for refilling time and time again."

In pre-launch operational testing, customers travelling onboard the Pendolino fleet consumed over 21k litres of water in three months – the equivalent of 42,000 standard sized 500ml plastic water bottles.

Matthew added: "As an independently-owned and ethically-conscious brand, we're focused on offering Wenlock Spring in a range of formats, bottled sustainably to enable people to stay hydrated, wherever they are."



Best year for film and animation specialists

Shrewsbury-based film and animation specialist 7video has reported the best performance in its 16-year history, with a year-on-year increase in sales of over 15% by the end of 2024. Owner Peter Sims said: "We have seen a significant increase in the amount of businesses that want to embed professional film and animation as part of their marketing strategies to engage and persuade more effectively."

It's a bizarre definition of democracy

Anton Gunter



Howzit. I know that January is traditionally a time for looking forward, but I want to look back at the circus called the General Election.

Governments are unfortunately part of our lives, whether we choose to ignore politics or not. The little cross we put on the ballot paper every five years is as important as any decision we make on a regular basis, and I for one do not take the responsibility of being a citizen of the United Kingdom lightly.

So let's take a light-hearted look back at the General Election of 2024 . . . if that is even possible!

There are 650 members of the House of Commons. In the 2024 General Election we had an approximate total of just under 4,000 candidates to choose from, yet only 60% of UK eligible voters turned up to vote – the lowest since 1924.

In the UK we are blessed with the easiest application system for running for parliament. You basically just have to make it known that you are standing, fill in some paperwork, and hey presto; off you go on your election campaign.

Looking at the 2024 candidates, we had 35 one-person political parties as opposed to 459 so-called independents. This means that 494

single individuals decided to take on the large political parties.

So, now we understand the madness of the candidates, we then need to look at how a majority is won. And for this we need to first consider horse racing.

If you have a race of 25 horses, the first one past the post is the winner, and likewise if there is only one horse in a race, that horse still wins. In the UK, the election process is exactly the same. It does not matter if you are in a small or large constituency, they all carry the same leverage – one all-important seat in the House of Commons.

This is where it becomes bizarre, because the Labour Party which won the General Election only got 33.7% of the total vote, yet it has 63% of the seats in parliament.

This gap between vote share and seat share is the most disproportionate on record. If you then consider that Reform UK won only five seats despite receiving more than 14% of all UK votes, it's easy to see why first past the post has been deemed so undemocratic.

Politics has always intrigued me. I watch Prime Minister's Questions religiously and have often thought how crazy it would be if the PM and the Opposition Leader would actually debate without knowing the questions in advance.

But what I have never experienced is voters wanting another election in such a short space

of time. Just a matter of weeks after Keir Starmer moved into Downing Street, nearly three million people signed a petition to call for another election.

With so many unhappy people and a government only enjoying 33% of the support of the people of the UK, is it little wonder they are so unpopular? The answer is a little deeper than that though, because you also need to factor in the broken promises and forgotten manifesto pledges.

Rising tax levels is a starting point. IHT on farmers is always a yard stick of what a government wants to do, and this one appears to want to make money from the wrong sources in my opinion.

The removal of winter fuel allowances from pensioners is a strange one. This is where MPs let themselves down.

One MP, who shall remain nameless, was apparently raised by their grandmother in poverty, yet voted to remove the allowance as they didn't want 'rich pensioners' getting it. That's rich, considering several ministers' apparent love of freebies!

But we the people get what we vote for. If the Brexit referendum and these latest elections should have taught us one thing, it's that we all need to work on our voter apathy.

We must get off our proverbial backsides and vote . . . because each tick is a vote to influence what we have now.



Seat share based on votes is often criticised due to questionable proportions

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

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Three quarters of businesses which took part in the survey said they expected turnover to fall in 2025



The county's firms have spoken

Can business roll with the punches?

Jobs will be lost and companies will cease trading this year as Shropshire employers wrestle with the financial implications of the Government's 'business bashing' Budget.

That's one of the headline findings in the latest quarterly economic survey from Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, which revealed some of the most downbeat forecasts from the local business community since the pandemic.

Asked about the November Budget's impact on the local business community, 72% described it as negative, and not a single employer felt it was positive.

The proportion of businesses now seeing taxation as a 'fear factor' in the coming months has jumped by a huge 40%, and there has been a 14% fall in businesses reporting rising sales.

The survey, carried out in the weeks after the Budget and covering the final three months of 2024, found that more than a quarter of firms were seeing credit terms getting worse, while around a third said bad debts were on the rise.

One hospitality business said: "Our bad debts have increased slightly, and we fully expect a number of businesses to cease trading after the Christmas period."

Another said: "We have been in business for nearly 20 years, and the current economic climate is the worst we have experienced. We are in survival mode."

Three quarters of businesses which took part in the survey said they expected turnover to fall – a rise of 23% on the previous three months – while nearly 80% of employers predicted a drop in profits.

One professional services business said: "We have more taxes to pay, wages, energy and rents costs all increase annually, but we are still in a competitive market, so our charge-out rates can't keep up."

A retail business added: "All indicators are for a continued decline in both turnover and profitability. Increasing costs cannot be absorbed. If we increase prices, we lose sales."

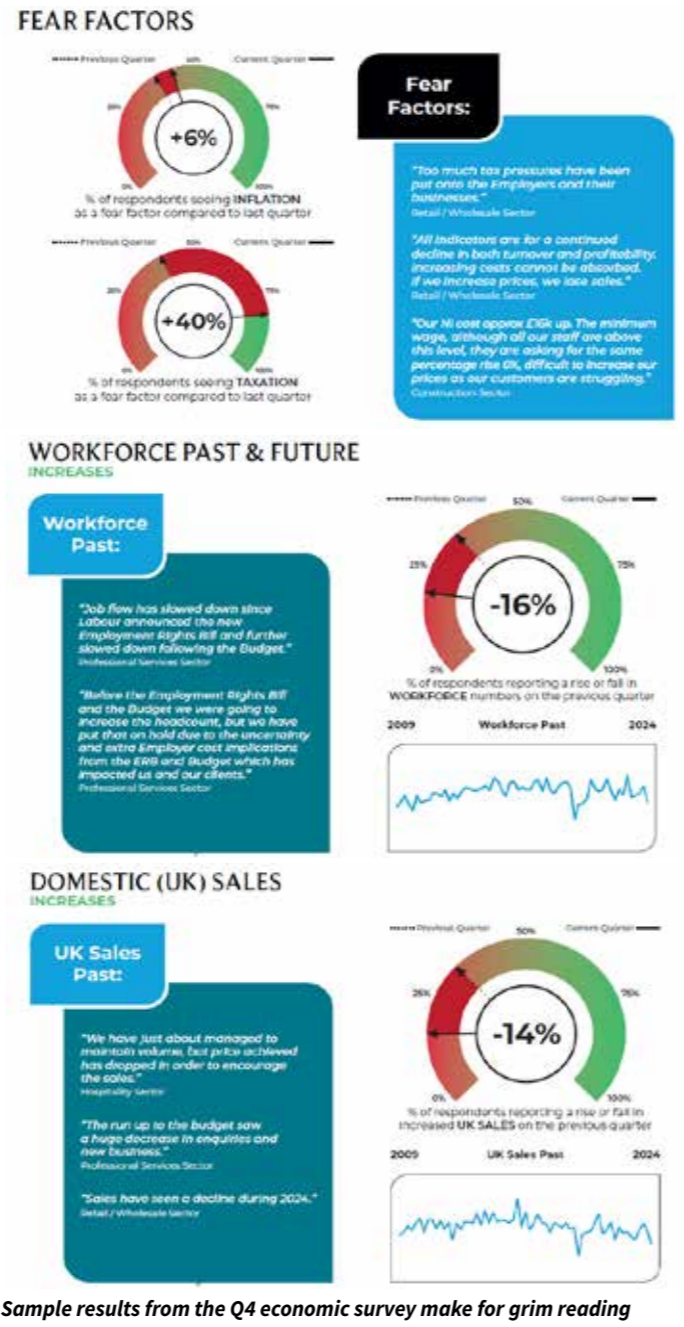
And a construction company said: "Our National Insurance costs are approximately £16,000 up. Although all of our staff are above the minimum wage level, they are asking for the same percentage rise of 6%. It's difficult to increase our prices as our customers are struggling."

One of the few positive figures in the report came with international trade, with an 11% rise in companies seeing growing exports, and a 16% jump in those reporting a rise in future export orders. Any business of any size with a base in either Telford & Wrekin or Shropshire is eligible to take part in the Shropshire Chamber quarterly economic survey.

The results are fed into the national survey by the British Chambers of Commerce, which is used by the Bank of England and other relevant bodies and economists to influence major policy decisions such as the setting of interest rates.

Alex Brown, from Shropshire Chamber's policy team, said: "Was this a business bashing Budget? Our results say a definite yes."

"Workers were told that the pound in their pocket is safe – not so, say businesses. Increased National Insurance and minimum wage rates alone have prompted businesses to warn of redundancies."



Leaving such a 'stop-start' year behind us

James Evans



Welcome to 2025! I don't think many people will shed a tear over the ending of 2024.

I have been involved in the property industry as a surveyor for over 30 years now and I have never seen a year like it. I describe it as a 'stop-start year' that never had any conviction or business confidence.

Don't get me wrong, it was not a financial disaster like the credit crunch meltdown, and as a practice, in financial terms, we actually had a decent year. It just never, in a property way, got any momentum!

The causes of this are: the General Election, the American election, plus the long drawn-out Budget. And then sitting in the background, there was the cost of living crisis.

Uncertainty in property, like in any business, is not good. People generally make decisions in property (which are normally by their very nature quite significant) when they are confident and certain. Therefore, the natural decision-making process has been paused!

Uncertainty does not help the banks and debt funding, which is often needed when

buying a commercial property or a property interest of any type. The banks have been struggling for the past year to find the path that interest rates will follow in the short term.

I think it is now generally agreed and accepted that interest rates will fall slightly, but not as quickly as hoped at the start of 2024 or to the level that was expected; particularly now, as Mr Trump may go on a potential spending spree at the time of his return to office, driving inflation in America.

There is now at least a degree of certainty at what level they will be at going forward in the short to medium term, however, allowing banks to factor in their margin with certainty and provide debt funding with confidence. I am advised by the banks that I speak to that they are open for business

2024 was also a challenging year because, unlike 2021-23, there was no clear property sector to advise people to invest in. The industrial sector, which has been the golden sector for the last few years, ran out of steam as the rental and capital growths that we had been used to were unsustainable. It was difficult to advise clients to invest in a particular sector, and instead became a year of looking at every opportunity on its own individual merits.

However, we can welcome 2025 with optimism. The cost of living crisis may just be coming to an end; with wage inflation in December out-pacing inflation in living costs. If Mr Trump is good to his word, he will sort

the Ukraine war within 24 hours of coming to power; interest rates seem to have a steady path; and we hope there are no more political uncertainties to deal with and that Rachel Reeves has delivered all her bad news.

Also, like the grit we show as a nation here in the United Kingdom, I think 2025 will see an attitude of 'we just need to get on with it!'

The one challenge that I see in 2025 for the commercial property market is the need to adapt to the Chancellor's 'attack' on pension funds and what this will mean for commercial property as an investment and succession planning vehicle.

Commercial property has often been viewed by private individuals, family trusts, property companies and funds as an income-producing investment for today, and a way to pass to future generations in their estate planning.

This thinking has been thrown into a level of uncertainty by Rachel Reeves's recent announcements and we all eagerly await the finer details – then it will be for the clever accountants to find the best way to mitigate their effects. The reality is that this may have a continued dampening effect on the commercial investment market.

In general though, my thoughts are that this will be a year to attack with optimism. It will not be a record breaker, but steady as we go... and there is nothing wrong with steady!

We will see if I'm right on New Year's Eve. I have no doubt that people will let me know!

Uncertainty does not help the banks and debt funding, which is often needed when buying a commercial property or a property interest of any type.

James Evans is head of Halls Commercial Property in Shrewsbury



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Google Ads and SEO . . . what's the difference?

Shaun Carvill



What's the difference between Google Ads and SEO? Both are powerful tools to get your website noticed, but they work in very different ways.

So, let's break it down and explore which one might be best for your business.

First, let's start with Google Ads

Google Ads, also known as pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, is a way to pay for your website to appear at the top of search results. When someone searches for a keyword you've targeted, your ad appears above the organic results with a little "ad" label next to it. The big benefit of Google Ads is speed – you can set up a campaign, and within hours your website can be showing up in front of people searching for your products or services.

With Google Ads, you only pay when someone clicks on your ad, hence the term "pay-per-click." The cost can vary depending on how competitive your industry is and how popular the keywords you're targeting are. But the key thing is, it gives you instant visibility.

On the other hand, SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) works very differently

SEO is all about improving your website so that it naturally appears in the organic search results, which are the non-paid listings below the ads. This involves optimising your site's content, structure, and speed, as well as earning backlinks from other reputable websites. Unlike Google Ads, you don't pay directly for traffic, but it does take time to see results. SEO is more of a long-term strategy, and it can take weeks or even months for your site to climb up the search rankings.

One of the big benefits of SEO is that once you've done the work and your site is ranking well, you can get ongoing traffic without having to keep paying for it. It's a long game, but it can bring more sustainable, cost-effective results in the long run. However, it requires regular effort to maintain those rankings – search engines are always changing their algorithms, and your competitors are constantly optimising too.

So, what are the key differences between Google Ads and SEO?

The main difference is time versus cost. Google Ads gives you immediate visibility, but you have to keep paying to stay at the top. Once you stop paying for ads, your site disappears from those top spots. SEO, on the other hand, is slower to take off, but once you've built up your rankings, you can have a steady flow of traffic without ongoing costs for every click.

Another difference is where your website appears in search results. With Google Ads, your site will be featured at the very top of the page in the ad section. With SEO, your website

will appear in the organic results below the ads. People often trust organic results more because they know they're not paid for, but ads gives you that prime real estate at the top of the page.

So, which one should you focus on?

Well it depends on your business goals. If you need quick results – maybe you're running a promotion or launching a new product – Google Ads can give you that instant traffic boost. It's ideal if you want to start targeting specific audiences and get measurable results fast.

However, keep in mind that the traffic stops as soon as you stop paying.

SEO is a better choice if you're thinking long-term. It helps build trust and credibility with your audience because you're ranking organically. It's also cost-effective over time since you're not paying for every visitor. But it does require patience and ongoing work.

Can you use both? Absolutely. In fact, combining Google Ads with SEO can be a powerful strategy. While you're waiting for your SEO efforts to kick in, you can use Google Ads to drive immediate traffic. This way, you're covering both short-term and long-term goals.

In summary...

Google Ads is about paying for instant visibility, while SEO is about earning your spot in the search results over time. Both have their strengths, and the best approach often involves using them together to boost your website traffic and grow your business.

Thanks to Nigél West of Fiveways Insurance for sending in this question. If you have a question, please do send it in at Clickingmad.com and use our contact form.

Shaun Carvill is the founder and managing director of Bridgnorth-based Clickingmad. Check out his podcast series called Website Success In Five Minutes at www.clickingmad.com/podcasts

New healthcare venture

A Telford business is set for expansion following the acquisition of a non-clinical healthcare training provider.

Reading-based Miad Healthcare, which provides training to the healthcare market in the UK, has been bought by TTC Group in a deal negotiated and delivered by corporate finance specialists Watersheds.

It offers leadership and development, business and governance, and patient safety services to organisations within primary, secondary and community care.

Bosses say the sale to TTC Group will provide a number of synergistic benefits – enabling TTC to expand into the healthcare sector, and allowing Miad to develop their offering in line with the evolving demands of the industry.

Libby Ryan, managing director of Miad, said: "Miad is a small organisation with not many staff and so we needed to find a bigger 'engine' to help us drive growth after reaching a plateau in terms of what we could achieve on our own. There are a lot of synergies and opportunities between Miad and TTC Group, and we expect to see huge efficiencies especially in how we run resources and processes moving forward.

"We're very pleased to be taking all of our staff on this journey with us and to also be working alongside TTC's experienced management team."



John Stopher from Watersheds (centre) with Liz Brewer and Libby Ryan of Miad Healthcare

John Stopher, partner at Watersheds, said: "The public healthcare sector has experienced a lot of change in recent years, which presents businesses like Miad with opportunities to expand their offering, ultimately upskilling healthcare workers to meet the needs of a growing population.

"Miad has a successful track record and maintains a pivotal position in helping to improve the healthcare offering in the UK. There

is significant growth potential on the horizon for Miad, however the company needed additional resources in terms of staffing, technology and operational efficiencies in order to achieve this.

"TTC Group is a growing training group, initially specialising in driver training but expanding into the wider training market. TTC offered the additional resource Miad needed to capitalise on its growing portfolio of opportunities, making them the perfect fit."



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Stallion AI Services are reigning Company of the Year champions

Spectacular celebrations planned for 25th anniversary of business awards

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce says it is lining up 'the most spectacular night yet' to mark the 25th anniversary of its annual business awards

The 2025 competition will be officially launched at an evening reception on January 23 at motor dealership Hatfields in Shrewsbury.

Tickets for the launch event are free, and available on a first come, first served basis. They can be reserved at www.shropshire-chamber.co.uk/events/events-calendar/shropshire-chamber-business-awards-launch.

"We're pulling out all the stops for the event's 25th anniversary to lay on the most incredible awards night in the event's history," said Shropshire Chamber chief executive Ruth Ross.

"Ever since the awards were launched in 2001, they have been a highlight of the local business calendar, and we have some very special surprises lined up to crown our winners and reflect on a quarter of a century of history."

The launch event on January 23 will give businesses the first opportunity to find out about available categories for this year – with



Aico celebrates the second of its three Company of the Year titles, in 2022

many favourite awards returning but some new ones being introduced too.

The Chamber's team will also be outlining some of the remaining sponsorship opportunities, with packages on offer for every budget.

Kelly Riedel, the Chamber's events and training manager, said: "For sponsors and for

finalists, the 25th anniversary competition will provide an incredible chance to showcase their brands in front of up to 700 people.

"We can't wait to show people what we have got lined up for this silver anniversary occasion; it's going to be the most spectacular night yet.

"Once again, the competition will be free to



Ruth Ross, chief executive officer of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, addresses the guests



Lord Digby Jones of the CBI was guest speaker for the 10th anniversary event



In London 2012 year, Olympian Derek Redmond was the guest speaker



Grocontinental won their second Company of the Year award in 2013



Weston Park, on the Shropshire/Staffordshire border, hosted the event for its first two years



The 2007 event had a James Bond theme – the Jaguar used in Die Another Day was a star attraction



Brazilian samba-themed celebrations for 2014

enter, and will be open to any businesses with an operational base in the county of Shropshire or Telford & Wrekin. You don't need to be a Chamber member to take part."

The award winners will be crowned once again at Telford's International Centre, which has been home to the event since 2003. The 2025 awards night will take place on Friday



Caterpillar Remanufacturing in 2006

Since the event's creation, the awards night has welcomed around 15,000 guests and celebrated more than 1,000 finalists.

Stallion AI of Whitchurch was crowned Company of the Year in 2024, adding its name to a glittering roll of honour which includes major employers from towns such as Telford, Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth, Oswestry and Ludlow.



Everyone wanted a selfie with Caprice in 2015

For more information about the awards, and a flavour of last year's event, visit www.shropshire-chamber.co.uk/awards. To find out about sponsorship opportunities for the silver anniversary celebrations, speak to Kelly Riedel on 01952 208200 or by email via k.riedel@shropshire-chamber.co.uk



The awards were held virtually during the pandemic. Host Carl Jones talks to Chris Greenough in the Yarrington TV studio



Back to the beginning – McConnell of Ludlow were the first winners of Company of the Year

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Alan Markworth of DENSO talking to delegates



Visitors got the chance to see the new training equipment in action

Skills improvement training centre has opened in Telford

Telford College has officially launched its new engineering centre as part of an ambitious plan to bridge skills gaps and boost productivity in the local economy – working in close partnership with local employers.

Businesses were invited to a breakfast briefing, which was an opportunity for new principal and chief executive Lawrence Wood to spell out his vision for the college and explain why he wants businesses to play a vital role.

It was also the official launch of the Local Skills Improvement Training Space, a high-quality engineering centre at the Wellington campus providing upskilling opportunities for maintenance technicians.

Visitors had the chance to see the college’s latest soldering, desoldering and electric repair equipment, as well as a new hydraulic and pneumatic lab filled with cutting-edge technology.

The facility is part of a series of investments across the region driven by the Marches Education Partnership, which has secured a £2.5 million funding package to boost skills training across Telford & Wrekin, Shropshire and Herefordshire.

Speaking to employers, Lawrence Wood said: “A college needs to be very much rooted in



Businesses touring the new Telford College facilities

its community, and key to that is our work with businesses – not just on technical skills, but soft skills around communication and teamwork too. I hear this loud and clear from many employers.

“It’s important that there is a dialogue between employers and the college to ensure we understand how best to structure ourselves to meet that need, with a clear and understandable menu of opportunities.”

Robert Lees, director of automotive, construction and engineering, explained how the new Local Skills Improvement Training Space was meeting a need identified by the Local Skills Improvement Plan for more upskilling opportunities, particularly

in specialist areas of manufacturing and engineering.

“We read the report, and we listened. Employers said they wanted flexibility, with modular training in practical subjects, so we developed courses in the areas they identified, with multiple start points where staff can step in and step out as required.”

Businesses also heard from Alan Markworth, a senior manager at Telford-based manufacturer DENSO which has been working closely with the college to help create and test some of the new modules.

He said the college’s focus on listening to and aligning itself with business had been ‘absolutely superb’.



Lawrence Wood talking to Paul Inions of McPhillips at the breakfast briefing



Hayley Jay and Hollie Whittles at the launch event

Into the metaverse: a breakthrough year for AI



Hollie Whittles

Looking back on 2024, we witnessed remarkable technological advancements that set the scene for further innovation.

Generative AI continued to dominate, with tools like ChatGPT and MidJourney becoming integral to industries ranging from content creation to scientific research.

Breakthroughs in quantum computing brought us closer to solving problems previously deemed too challenging, while AI-powered drug discovery accelerated vaccine and therapy development. The metaverse gained traction, with VR and AR technologies finding applications in education, retail, and virtual collaboration.

Sustainability was also a key focus, with advancements in energy storage, carbon capture, and green computing driving global efforts toward net-zero emissions. Meanwhile, cyber security evolved to combat increasingly sophisticated threats, emphasising quantum-safe encryption and AI-driven defence systems. These advances underscored a transformative year, paving the way for further disruption in 2025.

As we approach 2025, technology continues to shape how we live, work, and connect. The year promises groundbreaking advancements and the expansion of trends that could redefine industries. Here are some key themes to watch out for:

Artificial Intelligence at scale

AI is becoming increasingly pervasive, moving beyond specialised use cases into mainstream applications. Generative AI tools are expected to evolve, with enhanced capabilities for content creation, software development, and healthcare solutions. Enterprises will focus on integrating AI for efficiency, while ethical



My autonomous driving experience in Arizona

concerns like bias, privacy, and misinformation will demand greater attention.

Quantum computing advances

Quantum computing is nearing practical applications as key players like IBM, Google, and start-ups push toward error-corrected systems. Breakthroughs in this field could disrupt industries such as cryptography, logistics, and drug discovery. Watch out for the emergence of hybrid systems combining classical and quantum computing to solve complex problems.

Evolution of the Internet: Web3 and the Metaverse

Web3 technologies, emphasising decentralisation and user control, will continue maturing with innovations in things like blockchain. And the metaverse, fuelled by advancements in VR/AR and spatial computing, will lead to applications in education, retail, and remote working.

Green tech and sustainable innovation

Sustainability will be at the heart of technological development in 2025. From advancements in renewable energy storage and electric vehicles to circular economies powered by AI, businesses will aim to prioritise eco-friendly solutions. Tech giants are investing

heavily in green computing and carbon capture technologies, signalling a shift toward sustainability as a competitive advantage.

Cyber security in an era of hyper-connectivity

As IoT devices proliferate and infrastructures become more digitised, cyber security will remain a top priority. The rise of AI-driven threats and quantum computing's potential to break traditional encryption will drive demand for next generation security protocols, including quantum-safe encryption.

Biotechnology and digital health

Health tech is poised for transformation, with breakthroughs in gene editing, wearable devices, and AI-powered diagnostics. Additionally, mental health technology will expand, focusing on accessible solutions powered by AI and VR.

Edge computing and 5G expansion

The convergence of edge computing and 5G will transform how data is processed and shared. With edge computing enabling real-time data processing closer to devices, industries such as autonomous vehicles, healthcare, and smart cities will benefit from reduced latency and enhanced efficiency. The global rollout of 5G will further unlock opportunities for connected devices, enabling ultra-reliable communication and seamless integration of IoT ecosystems. Together, these technologies will support the growing demand for faster, more reliable, and scalable digital solutions in an increasingly connected world.

Autonomous systems and robotics

Autonomous technologies, from self-driving cars to drones and industrial robots, will continue their rise. I have just arrived back from Arizona where driverless taxis were everywhere. I tried one and felt remarkably calm inside while being chauffeured about! Innovations in robotics will enhance supply chain efficiency, agriculture, and elder care. Expect significant advancements in human-robot collaboration as these systems become more intuitive and reliable.

So, looking ahead, 2025 is set to be an exciting year addressing global challenges while opening new opportunities for innovation. Staying informed and adaptable will be essential for businesses and individuals alike in this rapidly evolving landscape.

Increase efficiency with IT

A new company has launched in Shropshire, pledging to help organisations grow by optimising their IT systems and readying them for emerging technologies including artificial intelligence.

Managed IT services provider Stiperstone plans to partner with organisations across the Midlands and beyond, to increase the efficiency of their IT and reduce operational costs.

The company, which has its headquarters at Grosvenor House on Telford's Central Park, has been set up by seasoned IT professional Tom Sykes who is joined by a team of experts.

Tom previously operated Telford-based company Rockford IT for 17 years, employing 50 people, and is a former IT director of a top 100 law firm.

He is joined by chief sales officer Wayne Howells, who previously worked at OGL Group.

"We are focussed on intelligently maximising technology," said Tom. "Many organisations aren't properly using the IT services and software they're paying for. Often, this is only realised when there's a problem or security breach.

"Our approach will give management teams and the boardroom a transparent understanding of their IT, which will support stronger decision making, including the integration of new technologies including AI."

Stiperstone says it has ambitious plans throughout 2025 including the recruitment of wider expertise from across the Midlands.

The team want to help organisations to innovate by integrating AI software for business, including Microsoft Copilot, which they say has the opportunity to enhance productivity, improve decision making, and create more efficient work processes.

The company draws on extensive experience providing managed IT services across various sectors, including professional services, hospitality, education, charities, and non-profit organisations.



Tom Sykes and Wayne Howells at the new Stiperstone HQ in Grosvenor House

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Turas Accountants

Hollie Whittles is a director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford

Finding the perfect partner

Accountancy firm Dyke Ruscoe Limited, which has offices in Ludlow, Craven Arms and Tenbury Wells, has merged with Streets Chartered Accountants to create a new company – Streets Dyke Ruscoe Limited.

Streets, which has more than 30 offices across the UK and employs more than 400 staff, says the deal is part of a strategy to develop a greater footprint in the West Midlands, close to the Welsh border.

Carl Davies, director of Streets Dyke Ruscoe based in its Ludlow office, said: "Dyke Ruscoe was established around the late 1920s and has since this time been a local presence in Ludlow, Tenbury Wells and Craven Arms."

"As part of our own succession and growth strategy, we have for some time been considering options for the future."

"While we operate within the West Midlands and the Welsh Marches area, we recognised the opportunity to grow the practice into Wales and across the West Midlands. In part, the barrier to our growth has been our size and structure, so we had to become part of something bigger."

"We are delighted to have merged with Streets – while we considered a number of



Pictured from left are Carl Davies, Charlotte Beamond, Brydie Prime and Paul Tutin

options, we believe that we have found our perfect partner.

"The Streets philosophy and outlook is similar to ours and they were keen to retain our sense of being a part of the local community. It was also important for us to continue to be able to provide our services in a relatively unchanged environment."

He said the deal would allow the company to offer a greater breadth of services, including more specialisms like personal and corporate tax

advice, banking and finance.

Following the merger, Charlotte Beamond has become a director after the retirement of Peter Reynolds.

Streets managing partner Paul Tutin said:

"We are delighted to have Carl Davies along with fellow directors Brydie Prime and Charlotte Beamond and their colleagues join the practice. It is especially pleasing to see and experience the mutual benefits and synergy to be had through firms like ours coming together."

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Shropshire Council chief executive Andy Begley's new book 'I Didn't Row The Atlantic #sowhat' draws on experiences gained from his wide-ranging career

Helping folk stay afloat

When he's not been busy running Shropshire Council, Andy Begley has been putting his management and personal development thoughts on paper to produce his debut book. ADAM PRINGLE reports.

Shropshire Council chief executive Andy Begley doesn't claim to have rowed the Atlantic. He hasn't scaled Everest either.

But that's why reviewers say his debut professional development book isn't your typical 'climb every mountain' self-development tool.

'I Didn't Row The Atlantic #sowhat' draws on experiences gained from Andy's wide-ranging career which has spanned senior roles in both the public and private sectors.

He shares some of the tools and strategies he feels have helped him on his own career journey – and explores lessons learned from the simple, hard truths he's faced along the way.

It's a frank, honest and practical resource for creative business thinking which has been gaining rave reviews.

"I don't have a primary audience for this book – and that was very important to me," he

says. "It would have been easy to aim this at chief executives of large organisations, or serial entrepreneurs, but that's not the point of this.

"I've written this in a way which I hope will appeal to everybody – from single person businesses and individuals who just want to progress themselves personally and professionally, through to chief executives and directors. If it stimulates their thinking in some way, then that's job done for me."

Andy, who is at pains to emphasise that this has been done entirely in his own time and is in no way associated with his council role, says the book is born from personal experience and learning, as well as drawing on 'the wit and wisdom of others'.

"All the ingredients, methods, clues and cues for success are with us – the key is how you recognise them and choose to use them.

"I'm a firm believer that it's not about what you do in life, but what you learn along the way... and crucially, how you choose to use all

of that information. I want to share the tools and strategies that have helped me on my own career journey, the crossroads I have reached when I've had to be brave enough to make a choice, and the lightbulb moments which have helped me to appreciate that there are more ways than you might think to solve any given problem.

"And if, at the end of all this, the result is something of a 'go-to' companion that provides a resource for innovation, business solutions, and opportunities to look at life's challenges a little bit differently, then I'll consider it a job well done.

"Lots of books have numbers attached to them with phrases like 'the rule of seven' – mine is not like that.

"I consider myself a quite straightforward individual, and I've not published this as a marketing gimmick.

"I think there's an honesty and integrity to what's been written."





Mid Wales adventurer Nick Sanders MBE has given a testimonial for the book



Darren Edwards says Andy has empathy and humility



There's a queue to reach the summit of Everest these days

World record-breaker Nick Sanders, the Mid Wales-based adventurer who has circumnavigated the globe on both bicycle and motorbike, says: "You don't need to have rowed the Atlantic to have valuable life skills to share. Andy is in an incredibly informed position to advocate and share experiences across a wide range of specialisms."

"I've been round the world 11 times and think I know what it means to travel, but I don't pretend to be a motivational speaker offering leadership advice. We do have one thing in common though, I think... the capacity for self-examination and the ability to look at life through a different lens."

Reviewer Beth K Davis, a ghostwriter and editor, says: "Andy Begley leverages his eclectic career experiences and pursuits to slap down the notion that leadership and personal growth come from extreme feats or monumental achievements."

"He shows us that real growth comes from curiosity, discipline, cultivating skills that truly matter in both business and life, and – shocker – learning from your mistakes."

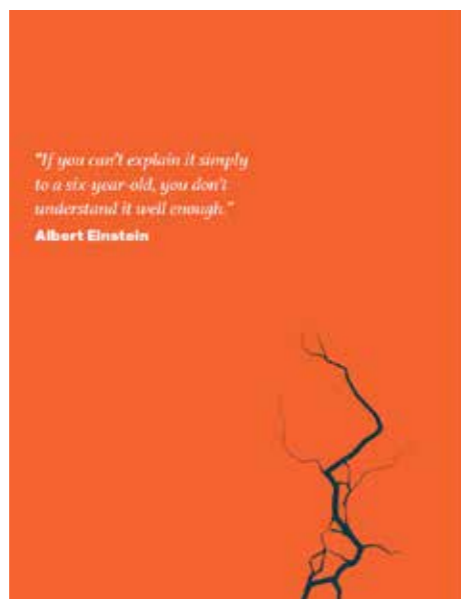
"This isn't your typical 'climb every mountain' self-development book. Instead, Begley cuts through the noise of traditional success and leadership advice, using humour to tear down corporate fads and champion something refreshingly simple: being human."

"With a blend of hard truths and wit, Begley calls for leadership that embraces humility, adaptability, and authenticity – qualities too often overlooked in the pursuit of status and success."

"I Didn't Row the Atlantic will inspire you to see leadership and life from a new perspective – one that doesn't require an ice pick but does demand a bit of introspection."

Darren Edwards is a former Army reservist from Shropshire who was paralysed during a climbing accident but has shown grit and determination to become a record-breaking adventurer and motivational speaker. He has also given a testimonial.

"Having started my career in local government, I often found myself frustrated by the lack of strong and effective leadership."



The book contains inspirational quotes and ample business advice based on Andy's experiences

When I first met Andy, I immediately recognised his empathetic, pragmatic, and strategic approach.

"Unlike many senior leaders, Andy leveraged the strengths of those around him and demonstrated the humility to acknowledge that successful leadership requires collective buy-in and ownership of the organisation's vision."

"In short, Andy's greatest skills as a leader are his empathy, humility, and ability to foster a shared vision that others embrace and take accountability for."

Andy says: "I hate being taught anything, but I do love learning. And in many ways, I feel this is what has compelled me to write this book."

"That might sound like a paradox – in fact this book is full of very intentional paradoxes... but indulge me for just a moment. Meeting someone who has the ability to teach me something, without preaching or patronising, is a very rare find indeed, and something I value immensely."



"I 'learn' in different ways – picking up snippets of wisdom from other industries, sectors and cultures and contemplating how I might be able to apply them in my own corporate world at an unknown juncture somewhere further down the line."

"It's impossible to know what's going to be of use to you until that moment arrives. But the more you can tuck away in your memory bank, the better prepared you'll be when it happens."

Andy says he has always been interested in the science of leadership, but increasingly found himself trying to cut through all the chaff.

"There's a lot of spouting for spouting's sake in the corporate world these days. A lot of vanilla. Theories that are bland, baffling, or too safe."

"People have a natural inclination to latch on to what resonates with them; we like listening to like-minded people because they reinforce our own beliefs, and make us feel comforted and reassured."

"But that's really dangerous in my opinion."



Andy was recognised at the 2024 West Midlands Leadership Awards

Restrict yourself to this audience and you'll always be trapped in your private thought bubble.

"Creating your own echo chamber is really perilous, but it's a trap which is so easy for us to fall into. I'm not trying to copy anyone with my views in here, or simply reach out to connect with those who will agree with every word I say."

"I believe it's incredibly important to recognise the type of people you are automatically attracted to – not always for logical, healthy reasons – to keep this constantly on your radar."

Andy became chief executive of Shropshire Council in August 2020, after holding the post on a shared interim basis through the early stages of the pandemic.

He has been stewarding the authority through challenging financial times. In the current financial year, it needs to reduce budgets by £62 million, which has meant making some very difficult decisions impacting both Shropshire's communities and council staff.

However, Andy has taken the approach that where there are challenges there are also opportunities, and has been using this as a catalyst to transform Shropshire Council – seeking to take the whole of the organisation with him.

With the full support of the senior leadership team, he has galvanised the whole organisation with a clear vision and a plan – The Shropshire Plan – which has been communicated to council staff, councillors and partners, emphasising the difference every person can make.

And the council says there are very clear signs of change now in place across the council, kickstarting a new culture and approach.

His work was recognised in the Public and Third Sector Leader category at the 2024 West Midlands Leadership Awards, which celebrate the people who are role models within their organisations, as well as showcasing the achievements and success of business in the region.

Council leader Lezley Picton says the award

was much deserved. She described him as 'the key driver towards Shropshire Council being recognised as a confident, capable and caring organisation'.

Andy says: "Whenever I'm putting a management team together, avoiding the echo chamber scenario is something I am acutely aware of. I don't want to surround myself with a group of people who will automatically resonate with my way of thinking. Or indeed appoint a procession of 'yes' men and women who lack the courage to challenge my views – or think that I'd object if they did."

"That's why it is crucial to create a degree of friction and difference in a very close team. How are you and your organisation ever going to evolve if your senior team constantly aligns with what you already think or do?"

"Now, more than ever, as we speed through the fourth industrial revolution towards an even more frenetic fifth, taking a risk and trying something different is no longer the most dangerous strategy. Standing still, and settling for the status quo, is far more dangerous."

Get your copy now

- I Didn't Row The Atlantic #sowhat, by Andy Begley, is now available from Amazon in Kindle (£2.99), paperback (£9.99) or hardback (£19.99).

ISBN: 979-8345918920

In brief...

- Businesses representing over 2.58 million people signed up to take part in the latest 'Techtimeout' – the brainchild of Shropshire entrepreneur Steph Henson. Participants included Cadbury UK, Paddle UK, and Rolls-Royce who sent Time Out bars to their staff to encourage them to take a break from their devices and screens.
- NetworkIN, the referral marketing organisation with bases across the UK, is coming to Shrewsbury. The new Shropshire branch is meeting every other Thursday at The Two Henrys in Battlefield, from 9.45am to 11.30am. It runs workshops and brings in a range of expert speakers. More details are available from Pam Allen: pam.allen@networkin.uk
- A memorial honouring the industrial heritage of the St Georges area of Telford has been installed. Funded by the local authority, it pays tribute to the area's long history of coal mining, steel and brick making and farming. Many would have been employed by the Lilleshall Company, founded in 1802.

Career milestone



Lewis Prince at Purple Frog Systems in Telford

An artificial intelligence engineer, based at a Telford technology company, has won a national award.

Lewis Prince, from Purple Frog Systems, has received Microsoft MVP Award for AI Excellence – one of the highest awards available to technology professionals – describing it as a 'significant milestone' in his career.

The global award recognises exceptional technology leaders who demonstrate outstanding expertise, community contributions, and a commitment to advancing innovation in the AI field.

He said: "I'm very humbled to have my hard work over the last few years recognised by Microsoft for my contributions to the AI community, and grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with like-minded innovators to drive advancements in this transformative field."

Lewis has been instrumental in spearheading AI initiatives at Purple Frog, developing cutting-edge machine learning solutions that optimise operations for clients.

He also actively participates in community engagement through leading user groups, speaking at events, organising community-based conferences and giving talks to schools to inspire students.

Alex Whittles, chief executive and fellow MVP in data platform at Purple Frog, said: "His work has not only elevated our company's position as an industry innovator but has also inspired others in the AI community to push boundaries and think bigger."

Purple Frog Systems specialises in innovative data and AI solutions to empower businesses across a wide range of industries.

Adding another layer of security to business



Joe Newton

The biggest weakness in most businesses' cyber security defences is their staff's passwords. You can invest in the best security equipment and software that money can buy, but a weak password will allow a hacker to walk through the front door.

Modern businesses have a plethora of systems to log in to, each requiring its own password. From accessing your Microsoft or Google account for emails and documents, logging into your customer management system, using a soft phone, to placing orders on supplier websites – the list is endless. Creating strong and unique passwords for each of these is virtually impossible, and if you do manage to do this yourself, good luck remembering them without resorting to the dreaded Post-it note of passwords.

Introducing Keeper, a password management and cybersecurity platform designed to protect individuals and businesses from data breaches and cyber threats. Keeper offers a range of features that ensure the security of passwords, passkeys, and other sensitive information. Operating on a zero-knowledge security model, Keeper ensures that only the user has access to their encrypted data, guaranteeing maximum privacy and security.

Most password managers require a strong Master Password to unlock your password vault – great, another password to remember before you even get started! Keeper solves this problem with Single Sign-On (SSO). If you use Microsoft 365, Keeper can be set up to authenticate using your Microsoft credentials. If not, other SSO options are available that may be suitable for your business.

Once logged in, Keeper will offer to import any passwords stored in your web browser, as well as from other password managers if



Keeper offers features that ensure security of passwords, passkeys and sensitive information



KEEPER
Cybersecurity Starts Here™

you already use one, immediately giving you a head start in populating your password vault.

You will then start to add your passwords one by one as you log in to the various services. Keeper will monitor all these passwords and notify you if any are weak, reused elsewhere, or part of a known data breach. These passwords should all be changed using Keeper's password generator, creating a password that is nearly impossible to guess. On most websites, Keeper can recognise when you are creating or changing a password and offer to generate one for you, then save it to your vault.

Once a password is stored in Keeper, you can use the web browser extension to auto-fill the login screen on most websites, eliminating the need to manually copy and paste your username and password. There is also a desktop app that can fill usernames and passwords on any app, not just web pages, and a mobile app that allows you to use Keeper on the go.

Although password sharing is not recommended, sometimes it is necessary. Keeper allows this to be done as safely as

possible. One way to do this is to share a record or a folder in your vault with colleagues for permanent sharing. The other way is to send a secure link that can only be opened once and will expire after a chosen amount of time. This is perfect for sharing a password with a new employee or a new customer without breaking the rule of never writing a password down and without learning their password yourself.

All of this has strong benefits for both the employer and the employee. If all employee passwords are strong, random, and unique, you significantly lower your chances of falling victim to a security breach. For employees, they no longer need to think up and remember large numbers of passwords; they just need one SSO or Master password to log into every system and service they use.

Speak to Connexis to see how you can improve your security. Call 01952528000 or email sales@connexis.co.uk



Joe Newton is Technical Director at Connexis, based in Telford



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So, what is the social value of your business?



Ruth Martin
Businesses and companies across the country are starting to wake up to the importance of having a positive impact on their communities.

They are increasingly keen to work out the social value of their businesses and recognise the value of their corporate social responsibility. Business communities are now starting to realise that having a well-developed set of social value principles at the heart of their operation drives sustainable profitability, staff retention and recruitment and helps to create purpose-driven teams. Having social value at the core of business

Ruth Martin is a marketing consultant at Martin & Jones Marketing, which helps businesses to identify and communicate their social value to their communities. It offers workshops and communications packages for businesses and third sector organisations to market their social value.

strategy is also increasingly a requirement for those that tender for work and form part of key supply chains. In the third sector charities, community interest companies and social enterprise organisations have social values written into their founding principles but they cannot rely on their altruistic values to get them noticed and keep them viable. They still need marketing techniques to highlight their social value to the supporters, donors, volunteers and partners they need to stay viable and continue with their good work. So here's five tips for all companies and organisations to get them started on working out their social value and how best to promote it.

What is your organisation's social value?
 Think carefully about what positive impact your organisation/development/project has on the overall well-being of your community socially, economically and environmentally. How does your organisation make a positive difference to your community? Can you support this with evidence and data to reinforce your message?

Include social value in your business mission statement

Revisit your organisation's vision to include your social value. Any changes you

make to incorporate social value principles must be authentically driven from within your organisation and should be a positive addition to your business.

Think about ALL stakeholders

Create a dialogue with all those connected with your business to make sure you are considering the positive impact your organisation has on every aspect of your operations.

Can you increase your social value?

Think strategically about how you and your team can contribute more to your community and so increase the social value of your organisation. Sending a charity cheque once a year is a wonderful gesture, but you could also think more holistically about how your organisation can contribute its skills and knowledge to help your community.

Keep it real

Transparency and authenticity are key when it comes to marketing your social value. Tell an honest story about the positive impact that your organisation has and support that story with data and evidence. Any attempt to claim social value where it does not exist will undermine every other message your organisation puts out.



Graham Wynn, Richard Parkes, and Hugh Strickland



High Sheriff Brian Welti, Mike Lewis, Ruth Martin, and Ian Preece

Opening of charity headquarters

Supporters of a Shropshire youth charity came together to celebrate the opening of a new £1.5 million headquarters in Shrewsbury.

SYA – All About Youth's new purpose-built base in Upton Lane was opened by the Lord Lieutenant of Shropshire Anna Turner, at a special event attended by more than 100 sponsors and businesses.

Donna Leading, chair of trustees at SYA, said: "The new building is absolutely wonderful and provides a fantastic space for young people to meet and enjoy a range of activities."

Attendees included representatives of businesses who have sponsored the new building including Penguin MEP, Fiveways Insurance Group, Morris & Co, West Bromwich Building Society, CQS Solutions and DecoStitch.



Lord Lieutenant of Shropshire Anna Turner declares the new building open



Mayor of Shrewsbury David Vasmer, Claire Purcell, and Laura Opechowska



MP Julia Buckley with Donna Leading and Amy Griffiths

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"Rob at Blue Orchid Recruitment recently sourced two new employees for our team. He was friendly, enthusiastic and dedicated, taking time to understand our requirements and match us with the best candidates for the positions available. Rob was professional and pro-active throughout the process, supporting us and our candidates with regular contact to make sure everything went smoothly. We would definitely use Blue Orchid Recruitment again. It's a wonderful service and Rob is a pleasure to work with. Thank you, Rob!"

Redan Publishing

Happy teams make for successful businesses

One in three workers say they will consider leaving their jobs this year if changes aren't made to their roles – and Shropshire employers are being urged to make sure they're not hit by a mass talent exodus which could be avoided.

The changes that people are typically looking for vary, but include improved work-life balance, more flexibility and increased recognition.

Research from Prezee found that more than 80% of staff are going to be looking for changes in their job roles in 2025, and are becoming increasingly impatient if they don't materialise.

The data suggests more autonomy in the workplace is central to achieving a balance in the eyes of employees, although attitudes towards this vary when considering different age groups:

- Age 25-34: work-life balance is most highly sought after
- Age 35-44: flexible work patterns are prioritised
- Age 45-54: staff want to feel recognised
- Age over 55: most likely to feel they'd change nothing about their role

James Malia, global chief growth officer and European president at Prezee, said: "Businesses should be considering what changes need to be made.

"Our data highlights just how vital that is, with a third of the workforce apparently considering changing employers come 2025.

"While the reasons for this will vary, what is clear is there's an appetite

for more of a focus on work-life balance, additional time off over the holiday period and financial gestures to show appreciation."

He added: "While these figures will no doubt worry many business leaders, they should take solace in the knowledge that the necessary changes aren't hard to implement.

"Listening to what the team is actively calling out for will go a long way to show their wellbeing is front of mind.

"That, alongside showing employees you care with regular rewards and recognition for going above and beyond, should be the focus for decision makers."

The data suggests more autonomy in the workplace is central to achieving a balance in the eyes of employees, although attitudes towards this vary when considering different age groups

In brief...

- Harper Adams University is offering local businesses an opportunity to access two free short courses this January. It has been awarded funding to deliver both a Leadership & Management and a Foundations of Project Management course to organisations across Telford & Wrekin. The funding is being provided by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

- Ludlow-based care home Alexandra House has been acquired by My Choice Healthcare. It is the company's ninth care home, and second in the Midlands. Chief executive Bethan Evans said: "We are looking to build upon its previous successes; continuing to place residents at the centre of our care and support delivery."

- A Telford transport company is helping to drive forward the transformation of a popular pool and green area in the town. Simmonds Transport, based at Stafford Park and High Ercall, has teamed up with the volunteer group Friends of Telford Town Park to offer funding and man hours on a major project at Grange Pool in Stirchley.

- A new jetty that will pave the way for a river shuttle service for the town, has been completed on time and within budget at Shrewsbury's West Mid Showground ready to officially launch this year. The 'Severn Shuttle' is a collaboration between Shrewsbury Men's Shed, the Sabrina Riverboat and Shrewsbury Moves, and will operate between the DMOS People West Mid Showground and Doctor's Field, off The Mount. Funding for the pontoons and enabling infrastructure has come from the Government UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and work to build the pontoon has been completed by the team at Shrewsbury Men's Shed, based on the showground.

- Oswestry-based home life safety expert Aico is collaborating with The Guinness Partnership, one of the largest affordable housing providers in the UK. This collaboration focuses on enhancing the health, safety, and energy efficiency of properties across the South West of England through the implementation of Aico's innovative HomeLINK environmental monitoring system.

- The new president of the Newport and District Agricultural Society has been named as David Jones. He grew up on a farm near Newport and his family has farmed in the area for four generations. He qualified as a Chartered Accountant and worked for Accenture, a global management consulting firm, where he was a managing director in the financial services division.

- Midlands Air Ambulance Charity has purchased a new H145 helicopter from Airbus Helicopters to replace its leased EC135 helicopter. It means the charity now owns all three operational helicopters that cover advanced patient care across Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, the West Midlands and Worcestershire.



The work to build the pontoon has been completed by the team at Shrewsbury Men's Shed



Chair of the charity Keith Marriott, with Lenny Brown of Airbus and Hanna Sebright

Chief executive Hanna Sebright said: "The purchase of our third wholly-owned aircraft is a significant milestone in our 33-year history."

- Local business woman Hollie Whittles is joining forces with the Shropshire Growth Hub and the Federation of Small Businesses

to bring a top line-up of special guests to the county for an event to celebrate International Women's Day on March 7 at High Grosvenor House in Claverley. Headline speaker is Karmen Novak from international beauty brand Flower and Spice, who is flying in from Amsterdam to speak at the event.



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Plant hire firm has been acquired

Shrewsbury-based plant hire firm Wildes Plant Hire Limited, and plant parts and spares dealer and parts dealer AT Wilde & Son Limited, have been acquired by Zofre Investments Limited.

The businesses continue under the existing trading names as part of the deal, with Peter Venn at the helm, and both David and Peter Wilde still involved in the business. The Shrewsbury-based team at Azets advised on the deal.

AT Wilde & Son Ltd has been offering plant machines and parts since 1937, with Wildes Plant Hire later being founded in 1964. Both have been family-run by the Wildes.

Specialising in a diverse range of heavy machinery and equipment, Wildes supports construction, landscaping, and civil engineering projects of all scales.

Peter Venn, managing director of Zofre Investments Limited, said: "When I first looked at the Wildes' business, I didn't realise how well-established and well-known they were.

"I'm delighted to have been able to complete the purchase of both the plant hire and plant parts sides of the business and to have the opportunity to join this excellent team, working closely with David and Peter Wilde."

Exiting director Ian Wilde of Wilde Plant Hire said: "I'm delighted that we're handing over the business to Peter, who will continue to successfully run it as his own, in the way that we as a family have over three generations.



Pictured from left are: James Dawson of Azets, Ian Wilde, Peter Venn of Zofre Investments Limited, Natasha Hill of Azets, Keith Wilde, Peter Wilde, and David Wilde

"Having worked with Azets for many years, it was refreshing to know that the corporate finance, compliance and tax teams ensured the deal was a seamless transaction, which has been imperative to allow for business as usual during the process.

"They've always given us the support we need when we need it."

Natasha Hill, associate director at Azets in Shrewsbury, said: "This high-profile Shropshire

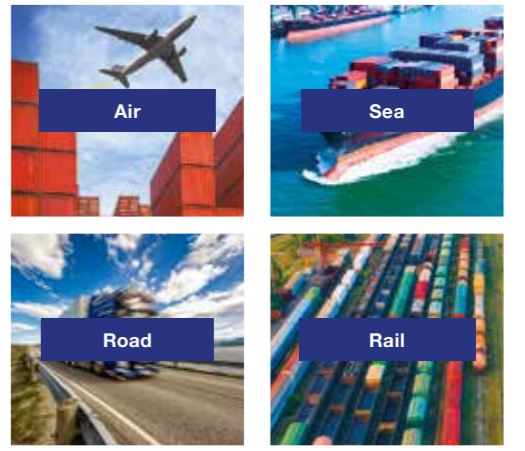
transaction highlights our commitment to supporting clients with tailored solutions and hands-on guidance, securing the succession of the Wildes' family business under new ownership with continuing operational involvement by the family.

"We are proud of the fact that we can provide the full range of quality advisory services in the region and worked with a local legal firm to achieve the family's desired outcome."



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Get all those financial bases covered for 2025



Helen Columb

You probably don't need me to tell you that the business world is changing at an unprecedented pace.

The change in government has brought with it some significant changes in the world of finance – and now is the time for all companies to start talking to their accountants and advisors to make sure they have their bases covered.

To get started, here are five things worth paying attention to as soon as possible to help your business run as smoothly as it can – and comply with changes in legislation.

Pension Allowance
Pension Allowance was increased in April 2024 to maximum contributions of £60,000 per year, though there are some restrictions if you have a high income.

This increased allowance should be particularly beneficial for a company owner wanting to make pension contributions directly from their limited company.
Our advice is to take an early look at your pension provision to ensure it is working in a way that is as tax-efficient as possible – and act quickly if that is not currently the case.

Making Tax Digital
It was no surprise to anyone when the Government confirmed its commitment to the Making Tax Digital programme in the latest budget – but they did move the goalposts somewhat.
The first tranche – covering all those with sales revenue above £50,000 – will apply in April 2026, so there is only one full tax year left before it hits. If you fall into this bracket, now is really the time to be talking to your accountant about getting your software in place and making sure you are prepared for the big transition.

Those with sales revenue above £30,000 will be brought into the system from April 2027, meaning time is also running out for them to start getting things organised.
And the big change announced in the budget is that there will be a third tranche for those with sales revenue above £20,000. The time frame for this has not been fully confirmed but it is expected that it will start from April 2028.

Our advice to all businesses is simple: there is no time to waste.
The Minimum Wage
April will see the latest increase in the National Minimum Wage, so you need to make sure your payroll functions are fully prepared.

The National Living Wage for those aged 21 is going up from £11.44 per hour to £12.21 per hour, while there are significant increases to the National Minimum Wage for those aged under 21.

The hourly rate for youngsters aged 18-20 is going up from £8.60 to £10, and for those under 18 it increases from £6.40 to £7.55.

Employers NI
The Budget, of course, also brought lots of movement on Employers NI, and a fair bit of controversy around the move to boot.
The threshold for when employers start paying NI has reduced from £9,100 to £5,000 for each employee, while the rate of employer's NI has increased from 13.8% to 15%.

But, on the plus side, the amount of employer's NI allowance that is now available has increased from £5,000 to £10,500 and is now available to large companies, whereas previously it was restricted if your Employers NI annual bill was over £100,000.

Capital Gains Tax
From October 30, rates increased from 10% for basic rate payers and 20% for high and additional rate tax payers, to 18% and 24% to be in line with the rates for residential capital gains tax.

Also, the rate for Business Asset Disposal Relief (BADR) is slowly being increased. It currently stands at 10% but will rise to 14% this April, and then 18% in April 2026.

If disposal is on your radar, it's absolutely vital to discuss the changes with your tax specialist to ensure your plans are timed to be as tax efficient as is practical.

Helen Columb is director of Turas Accountants in Telford

2024 proved to be an exciting year of change for Harris Allday. With the appointment of Edward James as Managing Director, the firm is committed to the growth of its UK client base and expansion of its professional network.

Having been based in the West Midlands for almost 200 years, we are proud of working with families for generations. The investment management team offer investment solutions, designed to support all clients, from directors and entrepreneurs, through to individuals and family wealth.



Edward James, Managing Director

We have made some very positive changes throughout 2024, further strengthening our presence in Birmingham. Priorities are shifting amongst the next generation of investors, and we are here to provide reassurance throughout changing markets and ensure that our clients achieve the best outcomes possible. We have a lot to look forward to for the year ahead.

Edward James,
Managing Director



Keeping an eye on AI

Market Reflection and 2025 Outlook

By Jack Peglar, Senior Research Analyst

2024 has been another eventful year for global economies and financial markets. Key themes have included the commencement of central bank cutting cycles, the continued dominance of the artificial intelligence (AI) theme and resilient economic growth, most notably in the United States.

In the second half of the year, political events have taken centre stage. Implications of the newly appointed Labour government's Autumn budget and the prospect of Donald Trump regaining control of the White House have been foremost in market participants minds. Clarity on key election outcomes and data supporting the thesis for a soft landing for global economies have resulted in financial markets climbing a wall of worry against the risks considered at the turn of the year.

Outside of China and some patchier data in Europe, global growth has generally surprised to the upside and recession fears have subsided. Optimism on more accommodative monetary and fiscal policy has also supported risk assets. Led by the US, global equity markets have returned 21% year-to-date, with the UK, Japan and China all producing double-digit returns in local currency terms. Softer energy prices have supported a moderation of inflation data, however the gold price has continued to hit fresh highs buffered by ongoing geopolitical risks, budget deficit concerns, lower real interest rates and central bank buying. As we approach 2025, overall market sentiment remains sanguine, however investors should be cognisant of complacency and mindful of newer risks on the horizon.

Following a period of exceptional performance of the technology related group of companies known as the "Magnificent Seven", we had expected to see a broadening of markets in 2024. Although a divergence in performance of these companies has been observed, with three of the seven underperforming the S&P 500 year-to-date, the AI theme has continued to drive performance in the initial beneficiaries of AI adoption trends. GPU chip designer NVIDIA, the current prime beneficiary, saw

revenues jump 126% in 2024 from the previous year with the share price appreciation (+188% year-to-date) making up over 20% of the S&P 500's yearly gain. We believe AI adoption will continue to become mainstream and that the theme is a durable one. We do remain sceptical however that significant valuation premiums on many of the more obvious beneficiaries are sustainable. AI has the potential to impact all sectors over the next decade and we believe positioning for further broadening to high-quality beneficiaries with less demanding valuations is a more prudent approach. This involves considering the whole AI value chain, market-capitalisation spectrum and companies poised to benefit from AI integration.

More generally, as the year has progressed, we have also seen some catch-up from small cap stocks both in the US and globally. We believe a continuation in mean reversion is likely from the current valuation extremes of large-cap to small-cap equities.

The run up to the US election was one of the most polarising on record, with polling extremely tight and the result expected to be on a knife-edge. For investors, the key considerations included taxes, trade, immigration, and regulation. Trump's agenda had been built on tax cuts, reversing immigration, protectionist tariffs and reducing regulation. In contrast, Harris' agenda involved tax increases, an expansion of regulatory intervention, and a more balanced trade policy.

The Republican clean sweep swiftly removed the uncertainty of a potential long, drawn-out results process and added further fuel to the unshakeable US equity market rally we have seen over the previous two years. Attention has now turned to the potential policies that Trump could begin to put in place. While Trump does have a history of using aggressive tariff threats as a negotiation tool, the potential for a re-intensification of trade tensions remains a wild card and key risk for 2025. Several unknowns



Jack Peglar, Senior Research Analyst

remain on the magnitude of tariffs imposed, the countries impacted and on which products. We expect this to be an area that is top of mind for investors as new information enters the public domain and further clarity on policies is provided.

On this side of the Atlantic, the Labour Party's Autumn budget delivered large increases in spending, taxation and borrowing. After repeat warnings from Prime Minister Keir Starmer of a "painful" first budget from the new government, the announcement included a few more compromises than many had expected. Despite a rise in the tax take of £40bn, predominantly coming from a rise in employer national insurance contributions, increases to Capital Gains Tax and Carried Interest were lower than had previously been anticipated.

Fears that Inheritance Tax relief would be removed for AIM shares also saw some compromise, with the relief applied cut in half to 20%. Overall, with a £100bn increase in government spending over the next five years, contributed to by further borrowing, this was an expansionary budget. With a continuation of relentless deficit spending on both sides of the pond, we are mindful of how this may feed through to inflation and the direction of interest rates. While neither of these recent events have resulted in "mini-budget-esque" bond market reaction, the longer-term sustainability of loose fiscal policies no doubt increases the risk of higher yields and is a factor we are watching closely.

Although we are vigilant to the developing risks in global markets, our central thesis and the essence of our investment approach are unchanged. We believe that an investment process that is centred around fundamental analysis, but also accounts for potential macroeconomic risks through purposeful diversification, should be best placed to deliver attractive risk-adjusted returns.

Our bond allocations continue to serve a purpose as protection against growth stocks while providing attractive yields again. We also believe real assets such as commodities continue to play an important role as protection against inflation shocks. Within equities, we are mindful of concentration risk, the potential for excessive optimism and higher premiums in certain areas of the market. Although valuations are not always a useful timing tool, history has repeatedly reminded investors that the price you pay matters.

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Ruth Ross



So here we are again, gazing into the crystal ball to try to predict what another new year might have in store for the Shropshire business community.

Given the uncertainties around the world right now, it's a tougher task than ever. But there's one thing I think we can pretty much guarantee to see in 2025, and that's change.

Our role at Shropshire Chamber of Commerce is to help businesses of all sizes to navigate the challenges this will present, and seize opportunities in the months ahead.

My vision for the coming year is clear – I want to deepen our connection with members, and ensure their needs remain at the heart of everything we do.

We know that businesses thrive when they feel supported, valued, and empowered, and our commitment is to 'love our members more' by delivering even greater value, fostering meaningful engagement, and promoting their success across Shropshire and beyond.

The next 12 months will see us strengthening our core services, investing in the right people and processes, and working tirelessly to stabilise and grow our membership base.

We will focus on being a partner you can rely on – not just to navigate those challenges I mentioned, but to help businesses become happier, healthier, wealthier and wiser.

By amplifying your voices and demonstrating the tangible impact of your contributions, I want us to inspire confidence and build a community where businesses of all sizes feel they belong.

Shropshire Chamber has achieved a lot in the past year. We recorded a hugely impressive 343,000-plus member engagements in 2024, with more than 1,600 attendees at our breakfast clubs – where numbers were 21% up on the previous year. We also held nearly 100 training courses, supporting well over 700 delegates.

And our quarterly economic survey continues to be an important mouthpiece for the county. The views are fed into the British Chambers of Commerce's economic summary which is used by policy makers when it comes to making important decisions on issues such as interest rates.

Recruitment continues to be a challenge for many sectors, so upskilling and retaining existing staff is more important than ever.

Alongside our busy in-person training and

Change is on the cards for business

events programme, Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has teamed up with a leading online training provider to give our members the chance to study for professional qualifications from the comfort of their own offices or homes.

We're partnering with e-Careers to offer upskilling and career development opportunities in a 'virtual classroom' – meaning you can take the studies at your own pace, and at a time which suits you best.

There are 11 different categories on offer: Accounting, Bookkeeping, Business Analysis, Cloud Computing, Cyber Security, Digital Marketing, Health and Safety, Human Resources, IT and Networking, Mortgage Advice, and Project Management.

All of these qualifications are accredited by independent, globally-recognised awarding bodies and offer the ultimate flexibility. With research telling us that recruitment is still proving to be a significant challenge for many Shropshire employers, there's no better time to upskill your workforce.

The e-Careers team have delivered training for some of the world's largest companies, including the NHS, British Airways, Sky, HSBC,

Vodafone, KPMG, Ford, American Express, and the BBC. As you can see, they have an impressive pedigree.

Finally, I look forward to seeing many of you on January 23 for the official launch of the 2025 Shropshire Chamber Business Awards. It's always a highlight of the calendar when we celebrate the amazing businesses we're fortunate to have in our county – but it will be even more special this year as we celebrate the event's 25th anniversary.

Have we got some surprises in store? You bet we have. Am I going to tell you what they are? Not a chance – you'll have to come to the launch event at Hatfields in Shrewsbury and find out... all the details are on the Chamber's website.

This is an important time for Shropshire Chamber, and together we will lay the foundation for a future where our Chamber is not just bigger, but bolder – recognised for leading positive change and delivering real results.

Let's move forward united, with a shared purpose to make Shropshire a place where businesses and communities flourish together.

Fired-up for first meeting of the year



Our networking group for young business people will be going behind the scenes at Telford Town Centre's new-look fire station for its first meeting of 2025. The building has been revamped and extended in a £10 million investment which has been described as 'a flagship construction for green technology'. And on February 6, members of Our Future In Focus will be given a tour of the building and get the chance to meet key members of the team. The event, from 5pm to 6.30pm, will include networking opportunities, and a presentation on fire protection from safety inspection officer Matt Angell. Anna Morris-Jones and Matt Angell (left and right) are pictured with Shropshire Chamber trio Chloe Symms, Alex Brown, and Ella Preece at the new-look Telford Town Centre fire station.

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

County's businesses are celebrating award wins

Shropshire businesses are celebrating recognition at a host of prestigious awards events.

Shropshire Festivals, the company behind events such as Shrewsbury Food Festival, Oktoberfest and Shropshire Business Festival, has picked up a trophy at The National Outdoor Events Association Awards.

NOEA is the UK's leading trade association representing and progressing the outdoor events sector, and Shropshire Festivals picked up the sustainability award for their work running zero waste events.

Shropshire Festivals owner Beth Heath said: "I'm so proud that our small, family-run business has been recognised nationally amongst the biggest players in the festival and events industry. We were also shortlisted for event organiser of the year and lost to CarFest - to even be in a category with them is amazing!

"We are chuffed to bits that we are being recognised for our sustainable approach. We've invested heavily in reusable cups, on-site recycling teams, carbon footprint reducing practices, and we promote sustainability at our events. Running zero waste events doesn't come cheaply or easily, but we believe it's the right thing to do."

There's success too for Midland Computers from Telford which has been named reseller of the year at the Acronis UKI Partner Awards, held at Arsenal FC's Emirates stadium

Sales and marketing director Alan Miller described it as 'an impressive accolade for the business'.

"The shortlist was a huge achievement in itself, but taking home the trophy is a true testament to the unwavering effort, hard work and dedication of our entire team."

And Rodriguez Events, a Shropshire-based private catering company renowned for their Spanish, South American, and Mediterranean-inspired menus, was named West Midlands Caterer of the Year at the Wedding Industry Awards.

"We are absolutely over the moon," said Emma and Heber Rodriguez, the husband-and-wife team behind the Whittington-based company. "Winning this award is such an honour, especially as it was our couples who nominated us."



Beth and Sid Heath from Shropshire Festivals with their national award



Celebrations for Emma and Heber Rodriguez



James Pilling and Alan Miller of Midland Computers pictured with their award

Tickets please for a new look on the railway lines

The Severn Valley Railway is seeking approval from its shareholders and members for a radical organisational restructure.

It describes this as a 'bold and essential move', which it says will bring multiple benefits. The plan is to bring together the three separate companies that currently make up the SVR, into a new 'One Railway' structure.

The aim is to create a stronger, more vibrant and efficient operation, and to secure a robust future for the leading heritage line.

Chris Walton, the chair of Severn Valley Railway (Holdings) Plc, said: "For the past two years, a working party of people who care deeply about the future of the SVR has been carrying out a strategic review of how the railway might be better organised and positioned.

"Its conclusion is that the SVR urgently needs a new type of company structure, to ensure it's in the best possible position to survive and thrive in the years to come."

In the plan set out by the SVR, the first step would see the conversion of the company that owns and operates the railway, Severn Valley Railway (Holdings) Plc, into a Charitable Community Benefit Society.

This would then amalgamate with the Severn Valley Railway Company Limited, the sister organisation that looks after membership and provides volunteers to help run the railway.

The third member of the SVR family - the Severn Valley Railway Charitable Trust - is fully supportive of the plan, but cannot commit to the process at present, because it is itself in a period of transition. The plan provides for the inclusion of the SVRCT with the CCBS as soon as its circumstances allow.

"There's no doubt that what we're planning is bold," said Chris. "But it's something that we consider to be absolutely essential, to ensure our railway survives and prospers."



Severn Valley Railway - Arley Station

"In common with others in the heritage railway sector, we've faced a long and arduous struggle over the past few years, made worse by a number of factors. We've seen huge increases in costs, falls in income because of the Covid lockdown, followed by continuing reduced passenger numbers because of inflationary pressures on leisure spending, and a detrimental effect on membership and volunteering generally."

Jonathan 'Gus' Dunster, the managing director of SVR (Holdings), said: "A CCBS will bring us many benefits. It should mean the SVR could claim Gift Aid on a large proportion of

ticket sales. There'll be significant savings in both compliance and administration costs. We'll be able to avoid prospectus costs on any future share issues and potentially avoid having to pay business rates.

"These factors will add up to hundreds of thousands of pounds every year that can instead go to maintaining and improving the railway itself."

Opened in 1862 after a nine-year building project, the Severn Valley Railway was originally part of the much longer Shrewsbury to Hartlebury line. The original line contained 15 stations.

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Social advantage = competitive advantage

It's time for social value, sustainability and CSR to move from the fringes into the core of business strategy

As the post-covid, AI-enlightened world emerges, businesses are starting to realise that the only change that can be guaranteed is that the pace of change will continue to increase.

However, there is one strategy that if adopted and implemented correctly will align your organisation with the rate of change rather than chasing it, leading to increased sustainable growth.

Make your competitive advantage, your social advantage. The Social Value Advantage will not only help to improve the lives of everyone within your sphere of influence, help to strengthen local communities, create new jobs and skills and reduce our impact on the environment – but it will also naturally lead to increased profits, secure future-proofed supply chain relationships, tender success, improved recruitment and staff wellbeing and retention, and improved brand reputation and market positioning. The Social Advantage is truly a win/win!

Businesses are increasingly moving from testing the waters of CSR, ESG and sustainability to the more holistic approaches social value and triple bottom line – understanding that people,

planet and profit are intrinsically linked. The first iteration of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 was brought in to ensure that suppliers to the public sector behave responsibly, sustainably and offered good value to the taxpayer.

While this initially affects those working alongside the public sector, this is now filtering down as best practice across all businesses looking for growth. In order for businesses to thrive in the future, these previously considered 'nice to have's' and 'good for PR' activities need to move from the fringe into the core of business strategy.

"CSR is not PR – CSR, Social Value and ESG are strategic business choices that when implemented authentically and with transparency, offer businesses and organisations long-term sustainability and growth," said Shropshire marketing consultant Ruth Martin.

Inspired by organisations such as B Lab – who are on a mission to transform the global economy to benefit all people, communities and the planet – three Shropshire businesses have come together to help promote the value of establishing high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability at the core of every business.

After months of being asked the same questions, Johnny Themans (Good2Great),

"We won't stop until all business is a force for good" – B Lab

Ruth Martin (Martin & Jones Marketing) and Liza Freudmann (BLA Sustainability) decided to come together collaboratively to champion the forward-thinking social value strategies being implemented across the UK to companies in Shropshire.

Johnny Themans said: "Shropshire has always been at the forefront of innovation – the industrial revolution, the steam train, even evolution itself! We want to inspire businesses and organisations to adapt these human friendly strategies that are good for people, place, planet and profit.

"We all shared the same frustration, in that there was a lack of understanding around CSR, sustainability and Social Value, so it made sense for us to come together and share our individual experiences and diverse knowledge collaboratively so that Shropshire businesses can keep their competitive advantage."

Sustainability expert Liza Freudmann said: "Working with organisations across London, Manchester and Birmingham we have all witnessed first hand how keeping Social Value at the heart of business is the future direction of travel for all organisations and we don't want businesses in Shropshire to fall behind."

Ruth said: "Many people view CSR as a cost and overlook the competitive advantage created – we would like to change that."

Interactive workshop

The business case for social value and sustainability: implementing social value at the core of your business for increased economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Don't lose the competitive advantage. Start your journey to meaningful impact and organisational growth by joining Johnny Themans, Ruth Martin and Liza Freudmann for an interactive workshop that will help you start or evolve your social value strategy into a meaningful business advantage.

Combining years of experience in leadership, communications and sustainability strategy development, join our three experts on their mission to make business a force for good across Shropshire.

"Our aim is for businesses to leave this event understanding that by prioritising people, community and our environment everyone wins, creating more growth, more jobs and a better world to live in," said Johnny.

In this session you'll hear about the compelling business case for social value and work with our experts to build an environmental and social action plan ready to take away at the end of the day.

"This isn't just a talking shop. We understand how valuable time is and have developed this workshop to ensure that every single attendee will walk away with a clear strategy outline and next steps ready to present to other stakeholders and start implementation" said Liza.

**Tuesday February 25, 9:15am – 12pm
AFC Telford, New Bucks Head
Stadium, Wellington, Telford,
TF1 2TU.**

£75 per place – early and group discounts available.

The workshop will help those taking part to:

- Learn the key concepts behind social value, CSR and ESG
- Understand the different ways business can build a meaningful and impactful social value and sustainability strategy that will generate increased profitability and growth
- Gain an understanding of existing frameworks and models available to help support the journey toward sustainability
- Demonstrate the case for developing strategic goals around social value and sustainability
- Learn how to develop social value strategies that align with your wider organisational goals
- Develop an action plan for strategic goal setting and organisational adoption through positive leadership
- Gain an understanding of how to authentically share your brand social value story with key stakeholders across the supply chain and wider community

Meet the experts...

Johnny Themans – Strategic leadership and change management specialist

Johnny Themans is the founder and CEO of Good2Great, the leading business growth consultancy in Shropshire that has supported over 2,000 businesses to achieve sustainable, profitable growth. As a trustee at Shropshire Community Foundation, Johnny is committed to driving forward both business and community across the county, helping to develop the Shropshire Investors in Community scheme to create a collaborative approach to building stronger communities across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin. Johnny is passionate about people development, focusing on creating happy, productive teams that deliver outstanding results and empowering leaders to thrive in a competitive, fast changing and often confused landscape.



Ruth Martin – Communications and Marketing specialist

With 20 years of experience in campaigning, marketing and PR, chartered marketer Ruth Martin owns Martin & Jones Marketing and works across the private and third sectors providing a bridge championing collaboration for mutual success and sustainability. As a member of Social Value UK and the Shropshire Investors in Community scheme, social value is truly at the core of the business. Ruth and her team are experts in communications who can craft comms, marketing strategies and campaigns to help tell your story in an impactful and authentic way.



Liza Freudmann – Sustainability expert

Liza Freudmann is a communications and sustainability leader with over 25 years of experience working in corporate businesses, including more than 10 years as head of marketing for M&S and a stint at B Lab UK as marketing director, responsible for raising awareness of and growing the B Corp community in the United Kingdom. Since moving to Shropshire, Liza has worked with start-ups to large international brands in sectors from food and drink to manufacturing, to media to energy, to align their brand strategies with their wider social and environmental goals.



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Emily Marren pictured with Clara Westbrook – All photos by Rosalie Arran: WithRosalie – Brand Photography Specialist

Sky high success

More than 80 women – including businesswomen from across Shropshire – gathered at Hadley Park House Hotel in Telford to raise funds for Midlands Air Ambulance Charity.

The annual Posh Frocks Charity Dinner raised more than £2,800 to help make more ambulance missions possible for the vital lifesaving pre-hospital emergency service.

Kim Gilmour, of Telford-based Connect Consultancy, who organises the annual event, said: “I am truly grateful to everyone who attended, donated and supported this event.

“Midlands Air Ambulance Charity receives no Government funding and relies on generous donations to make its daily lifesaving missions possible. We were fortunate to have so many wonderful gifts donated for the hamper raffle encouraging everyone to dig deep and support this amazing charity.”

Lauren Czerniuk, corporate partnerships executive for Midlands Air Ambulance Charity, said: “It is thanks to those in our local communities that we can continue saving lives every day.

“We appreciate every single donation from generous supporters and events like the Posh Frocks Dinner helps us provide a vital, lifesaving service across the Midlands so we can be there when patients need us.”

Kim added: “This brings the amount these events have raised for local charities over the last 20 years to nearly £39,000.”



Alison Wood, Shelagh Keane, Lauren Czerniuk, Christine Morrison, Kim Gilmour and Marina Ibrahim



Mandy Reid, June Tranter, Jas Pooni, Carole Turner, Elaine Bailey, Lorette Williams, Jo Jackson, Marsha Fisher, Janice Williams, Ingela Giransson, Jasmin Thomas and Jane Brown



Amy Case and Alison Green pictured at the event at Hadley Park House Hotel



Val Kirton, Claire Stokes, Nicole Gunter, Sally Themans, Jodie Feehan, Jo Baugh, Mandy Medlyn, Philippa Turner, Siobhan Ilsley and Jenny Wynn



Louise Madeley, Shirley Lane, Lena Jarl Churm and Carole Aveson



Cathy Lowe, Paula Bones and Linda Hood

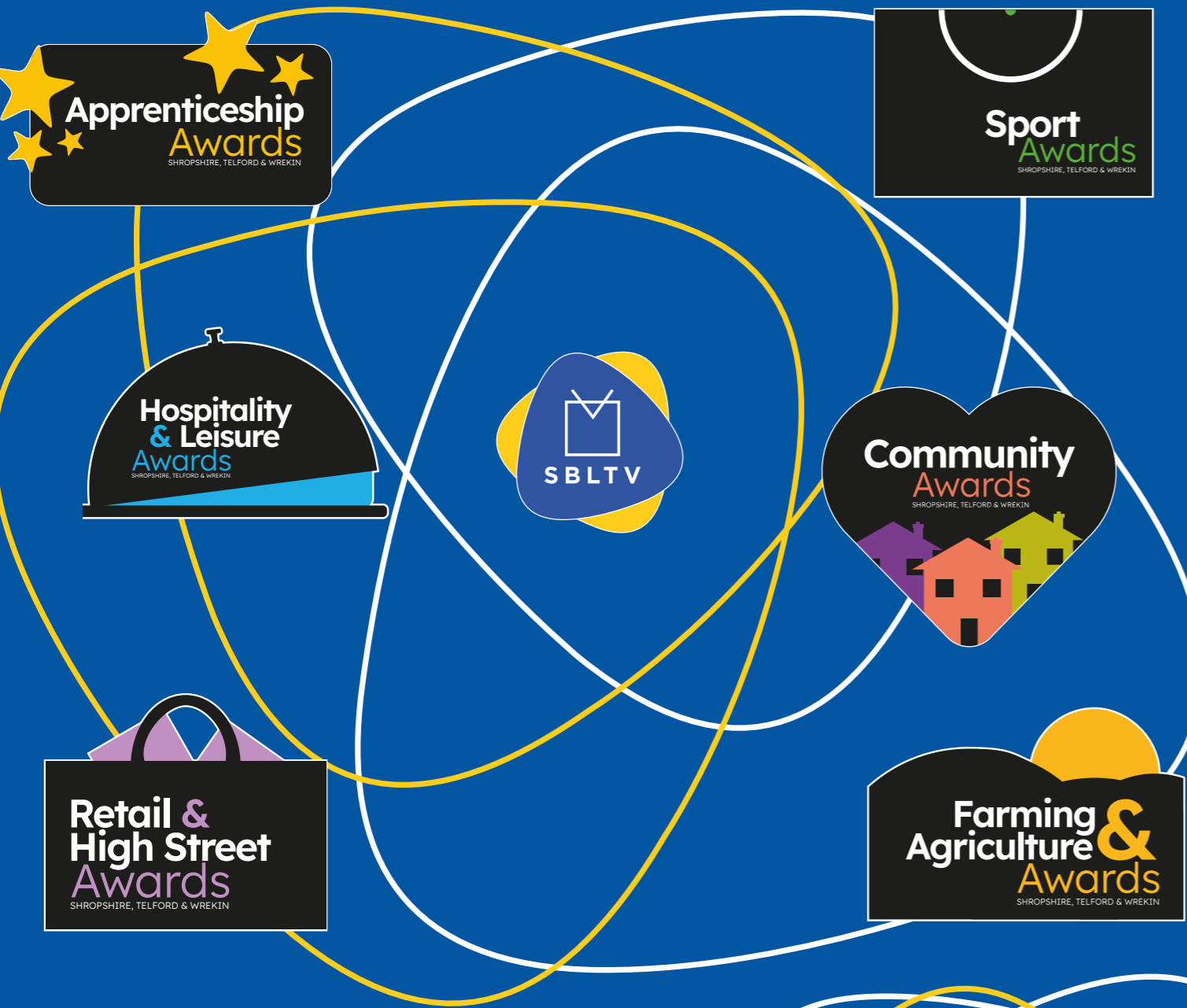


Sarah Bailey, Nikki Goodall, Brenda Hodnett and Pat Hodnett



Samantha Lane, Sarah Lowe, Sharon Gardner, Julie Wiggin and Rachael Tyrrell

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.

We have some fantastic sponsorship opportunities available - email awards@sbltv.co.uk for more details

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Buying goods online: know your rights



The internet has turned millions of people into entrepreneurs. You may be one yourself and not even realise it.

A decade or so ago, the most common way people would buy second hand goods would be by getting up early and tramping around a field or car park. Crafts would usually be sold at specialist shops or artisan markets. Then along came eBay. What started off as an online auction site became a global powerhouse, allowing us all to flog the tat in our attic or our crafty creations. Flash forward to the present and the internet is awash with 'online marketplaces' - digital markets that let you browse thousands or even millions of individuals and small businesses. There are marketplaces for vintage goods, arts and crafts and highly specialist items. If you can think of it, someone is selling it somewhere. All of this is (mostly) great news. We're throwing fewer things away, making cash

during challenging times and supporting traders we never would have known about before. But there's a problem. Your rights when buying from individuals are a little different to those when purchasing from businesses. Here's my guide.

Am I buying from a shop or an individual?

If you buy or sell goods in the UK you have a wide range of rights if things go wrong. But knowing who you are buying from matters, because retailers are covered by two major laws that govern your shopping rights when it comes to returns and disputes.

It's not always so straightforward though. On many online marketplaces you can buy from both individuals and retailers, and it's not always clear who fits into each category. So if you're selling a few things lying around the house, when do you become a business?

As a general rule, you have to pay tax on goods or services you sell when your profits go over £1,000 (excluding expenses). At that point you have to tell HMRC about your profits and potentially start paying tax on them.

If you flog a few things on an occasional basis, you're likely to be classed as an individual seller. If you regularly do this or bill yourself as a shop, then you become a trader. And when you are a trader, you are required to follow your obligations as a small business under the Consumer Rights Act.

That means shoppers have the right to return faulty or misrepresented goods to the trader or business, and get a full refund if it's reported within the first 30 days. Under the Consumer Contract Regulations, shoppers

have the right to change their mind within 14 days too.

Private sellers

According to the Consumer Rights Act, when you buy from an individual the goods must be 'as they were described'. Sellers can't 'misrepresent' the goods, but they don't have to list every fault either. So a 'dress with some wear around the hem' should be just that. The seller can't claim the dress is in perfect condition though as that would be untrue.

The best way to counter mis-selling - deliberate or accidental - is to ask for clear pictures of the item and assurances that it functions as advertised, before buying.

Sorting out complaints with private sellers

If you buy through an online marketplace, they should have a dispute resolution service if a problem arises. However, these complaints can be complex. Many sellers I speak to argue that their customers don't always have realistic expectations or have damaged the goods. Whereas buyers often argue that the item was wilfully misrepresented.

The website's dispute resolution scheme will usually filter out any scammers. So that just leaves problems over the quality of goods.

I find it pays to be pragmatic. If you just want a refund and the seller just wants their goods back, then agree a return, documenting the process with photos.

Keep those emails or communications though. If you paid by card and a refund isn't forthcoming, your bank might be able to charge back your cash.

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

NHS Trust position

Paula Gardner has joined The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust as interim chief nursing officer.

Paula is an experienced nurse who has worked in NHS acute trusts for over 40 years, including most recently as interim chief nursing officer at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and before this as chief nurse at Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.



Paula Gardner

Jo Williams, chief executive of SaTH, said: "Paula is a well-respected and experienced nurse with an impressive track record in leadership in the hospital sector. She is passionate about putting patients first and delivering a high quality patient experience, which will help us to continue the improvement happening in the Trust."

Paula, who is supporting the Trust while recruitment is under way for the permanent role, said: "I am keen to work with the teams to understand how we can deliver high quality care and continue the transformational improvements."

"I believe strongly in supporting the wellbeing and development of our colleagues, and this will remain a focus as we work to improve the care for all the communities we serve."

Luceco has a new director

Luceco – the Telford-based lighting and electricals manufacturer – has a new UK trade sales director.

Ian Hunter has a wealth of experience in the electricals industry across all channels and previously worked for leading brands including Legrand, Scolmore and Electrium (part of Siemens).

John Hornby, chief executive

at Luceco Group PLC, said: "Ian's appointment is a reflection of our ambitious long-term goals for Luceco. It's a new role, and Ian will be focused on UK trade and project responsibilities. With his strong industry relationships and proven track record, I am confident that Ian's contribution to the business will be highly significant."



Ian Hunter



Sally Themans

Raising profiles

Sally Themans has joined the board of Visit Shropshire – the team that puts the county on the map.

She says the role fits really well with her work raising the profile of Shropshire towns, high streets and businesses.

Practice manager

Accountancy firm Turas has promoted Kelly Wilson to practice manager to handle client liaison and community engagement.

Kelly, from Stirchley in Telford, joined the company five years ago as a part-time office administrator.

Her role has expanded as the company has grown and she is now responsible for co-ordinating client needs and internal office functions to keep the practice running efficiently and ensuring deadlines are met.

Kelly's role includes regular communication with clients throughout the year to keep them aware of deadlines and to ensure they send all necessary information on time, managing onboarding for new clients, liaising with HMRC, and ensuring compliance with anti-money laundering regulations.

She also co-ordinates Turas' community engagement initiatives and organises volunteer work with local projects and charities, having recently organised a volunteer day for the Turas team with the Cuan Wildlife Rescue at Much Wenlock.



Kelly Wilson



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Chair of trustees



Julie Kaur (left) with Sue Robson

A new chair of trustees has taken over at the helm of Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin.

Julie Kaur, who runs a convenience store at Hadley, took over the role from outgoing chair Sue Robson at the annual general meeting.

"I've been involved in Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin since around the time of the pandemic, but I look forward greatly to now being even more involved in this excellent organisation," said Julie, who has been a trustee at the charity for almost five years.

"The many services provided by Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin are so important, making such a big difference to people's lives."

Evolution of business

A group of business owners and entrepreneurs are getting expert support to grow and succeed after being selected to be part of the first ever "Evolving Business Cohort".

The group is made up of 15 members, ranging from established businesses to brand new ventures, who will each receive one-to-one support as well as the opportunity to apply for an exclusive cohort grant, as part of the Work in Shrewsbury programme.

Cohort members were welcomed at a special event held at Draper's Hall, attended by project coordinator Liza Freudmann, the Work in Shrewsbury team, and Julia Buckley MP.

Work in Shrewsbury is a UKSPF-funded campaign being led by Shrewsbury BID to attract inward investment and boost the local economy.

Seb Slater, executive director of Shrewsbury BID, said the Evolving Business Cohort aimed to inspire local businesses and entrepreneurs to develop their skills.

"We were delighted to receive a large number of applications, all of which were of a really high calibre, and we had to make some tough decisions to appoint our cohort of 15 people.

"It's great that we have a range of ages – some are in their 20s while others are in their 50s – and the businesses vary from holistic health to a carbon savings consultant."

They include local father and entrepreneur Kevin Williams, who is launching a children's bike



Tara Lawford of Claremont Design at the Cohort welcome lunch



Shrewsbury MP Julia Buckley talks to David Brookes of Carbon Happy and cohort members

brand with his wife Michelle. He said: "Our mission is to reduce screen time, increase physical activity and promote family wellbeing, contributing to mental health benefits."

Also joining the cohort is Sophie Martin of The Good Egg Bakery, who said: "I have always had a passion for baking. The Good Egg was a project born from a childhood dream that I managed to turn into a little shop with the hope of much more."

Graduates have qualified as chartered surveyors



Kate Oakes (left) and Charlotte Hurley

Two talented graduates have qualified as chartered surveyors at the rural professional department of Halls.

Kate Oakes and Charlotte Hurley – who work at the company's Shrewsbury headquarters and Kidderminster office – have passed their assessment of professional competence for the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

Kate, from Penkridge, joined Halls a year ago, while Charlotte, from Ombersley, has worked for the company since 2022. They are both rural enterprise and land management graduates of Harper Adams University.

Halls' managing director Jon Quinn said: "Kate and Charlotte are shining examples of the blossoming talent that we have within our business. I am delighted that they have both qualified as chartered surveyors and look forward to watching their careers continue to grow with Halls.

"A skilled, dedicated and multi-disciplined workforce is essential if we are to achieve our future growth plans. There is real energy and enthusiasm to drive the company forward to continued success by taking advantage of emerging business opportunities."

Meeting increasing demand

Law firm Lanyon Bowdler has expanded its family law team in Telford with the appointment of two lawyers to help meet an increasing demand for its services.

Solicitor Prianka Muruhathas and senior associate solicitor Sonali Obhrai have joined the team, which is now one of the largest in the area.

Prianka and Sonali are both members of Resolution – emphasising their commitment to the constructive resolution of family disputes.



Sonali Obhrai and Piranka Muruhathas with Sue Hodgson

Sue Hodgson, head of Lanyon Bowdler's family law team, said: "We have seen a steady growth in clients across the firm but particularly in Telford, so we were keen to add to our team in order for us to meet this demand.

"Handling family cases requires understanding, sensitivity and support at each stage of the legal process, and I am sure that Prianka and Sonali will be extremely valuable additions to the firm."

Prianka deals with a broad range of family matters arising from the breakdown of relationships, and has an understanding of how to deal sensitively with cases involving cultural or religious aspects.

Sonali deals with all aspects of family law including divorce and associated financial matters, separation, pre and post nuptial agreements, and arrangements concerning children.



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NEAL HOOPER is managing director of Aico, the home life safety products company based in Oswestry. This is his 11th year with the business

IN ONE SENTENCE, WHAT DOES YOUR JOB INVOLVE?

Jack of all trades, master of none.

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ECONOMY?

Like everybody, unfortunately we are all susceptible to this. It is the incessant media negativity that fuels impending doom – even when our economy is healthier. The UK is a great place and we achieve wonderful things; I just wish there was more positivity.

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

I think we all have to await actual activity on this one, as opposed to the endless noise.

HOW DO YOU VIEW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – AND HOW MIGHT YOU AND YOUR BUSINESS USE IT?

It is a force for incredible good, in the right hands. Our business utilises it in every single department. The advances in science and medicine are incredible. Some huge minds are rightly concerned though that it also could be destructive. It is here to stay and will become huge, and we all need to embrace it to progress.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?

Occasionally useful.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Delegating. Empowering others to enjoy the opportunities that I have been lucky to have.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?

People – business is simple. Building true teams is so powerful.

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?

People – hopefully having played even a small part in their development.

PET HATES?

Too many to list, but all around the moral compass.

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

Lose the ginger New Romantic wedge!

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?

It's very rare I am away from work one way or another!

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?

The people.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?

Only LinkedIn. I have strong views on the rest and most of them are negative, so I'll move on.

FAVOURITE MOVIE AND/OR TV SHOW?

The Usual Suspects/Sopranos. I love films, quality series and reading whenever I do get a chance – especially reading. I always carry a book around in the hope I get a chance. My library at home has over 1,000 books and it's a joy.

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?

Both.

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?

My parents and grandparents did so much for me and passed way too early. It would be beyond my imagination to see them again and thank them.



Neal Hooper



Neal is proud of Aico's community work supporting deserving causes



What a line-up: The Usual Suspects is a film favourite

WHAT WOULD YOU COOK FOR THEM?

I can't and they would be horrified if I did. Hopefully Aktar Islam from Opheem could step in.

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

I played cricket for Worcestershire Under 19s for two years.

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, PROFESSIONALLY AND PERSONALLY?

Professionally more progression and growth as I'm surrounded by outstanding people who are all up to something. Personally, purely good health.

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