

SHROPSHIRE

January/February 2024
FREE

BUSINESS

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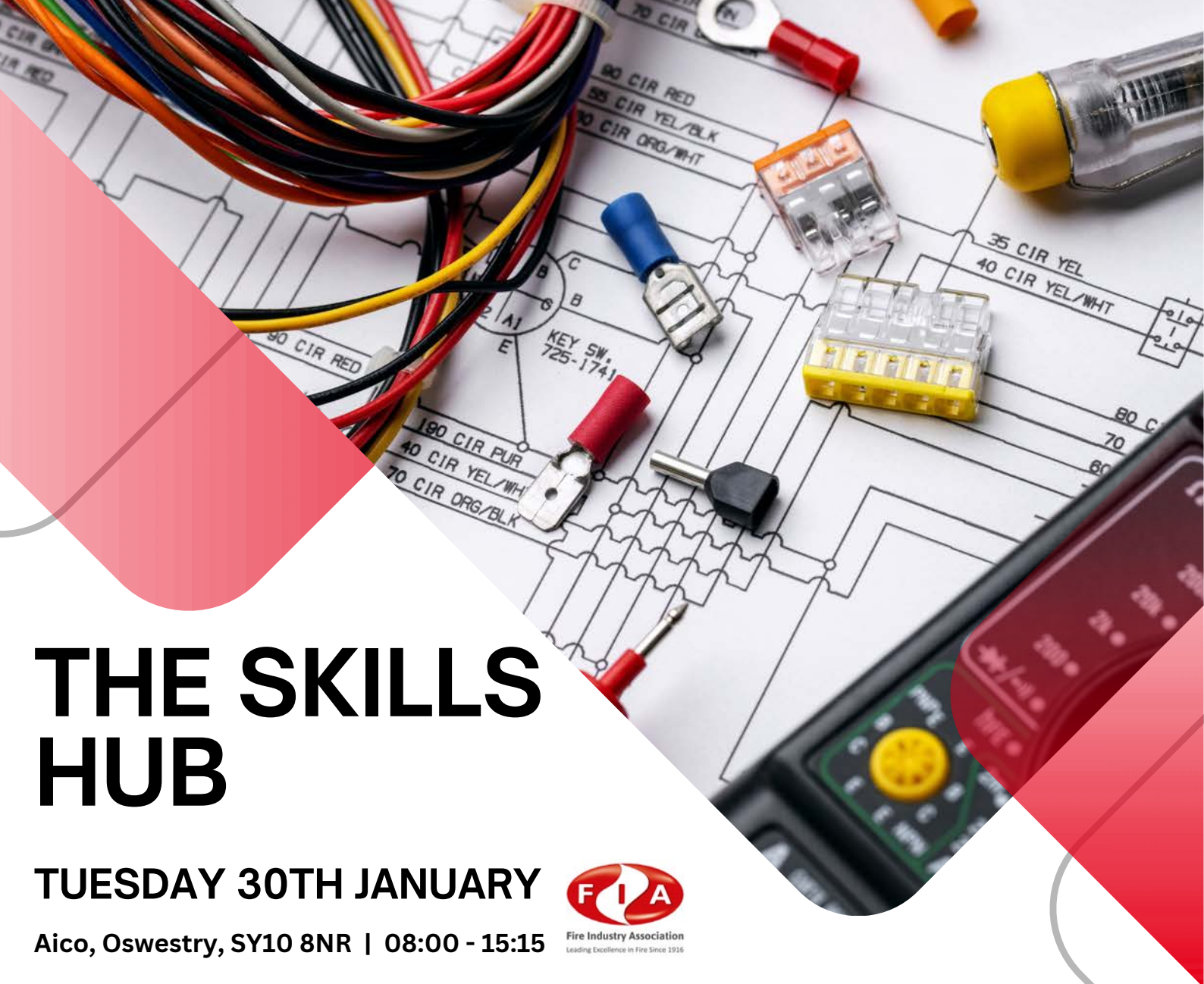
2024

What's in store?

● Business confidence
poll results

● Mergers, expansions
and acquisitions

● Flooding – measuring
the risks



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MIDLANDS MEDIA AWARDS
Magazine of the Year – winner



SHROPSHIRE CHAMBER AWARDS
Best New Business (SBLTV)

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IN PRINT

- 6 **Cover Story:** Navigating the horizon – what’s in store for us in 2024?
- 12 **Cyber Security:** How safe is your company’s most sensitive data?
- 14 **Flood Risk:** Meet the man behind the UK’s first groundwater risk map
- 20 **Greenwashing:** How to check a company’s sustainability credentials
- 28 **Golden Jubilee:** Construction firm looks back at 50 years of change
- 44 **Start-Up Spotlight:** Profiling the county’s latest breed of entrepreneurs
- 52 **Social Scene:** Shropshire Law Society annual dinner, picture special

ONLINE

Why a healthy body and healthy mind is vital at the start of the new year – Sian Brennan-Todd sets out some areas we can reset and re-evaluate. Plus, daily news updates, and download archive copies of previous Shropshire Business magazines.



ON TV

Watch us: The January edition of Shropshire Business Live TV airs on the 25th. If you missed our festive edition in December, it’s all available on the catch-up player, online at sbltv.co.uk, or watch on **Youtube**



By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor

SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

Take your seats, strap yourselves in firmly, and prepare to experience the rollercoaster they call 2024.

As we take our first tentative steps into a new year, the one thing which seems certain to dominate the economic agenda is uncertainty.

A looming General Election – which our own Shropshire Business poll suggests most businesses would like to see sooner rather than later – coupled with ongoing fallout from global tensions, paints a somewhat confusing picture.

So how do we navigate the safest, most profitable and least precarious path through the year? We’ve been speaking to employers across a broad range of sectors to canvass their views for our cover story.

This time last year, spiralling inflation was driving demand for higher wages, putting pressure on the cost of living at a time when the Bank of England was attempting to drive it down.

The labour market was also incredibly tight, thwarting many employers who simply couldn’t find the right calibre of staff to expand.

Both of these pressure points have eased somewhat, but certainly not yet gone away.

But we like to take a glass-half-full approach, and the pages of our first edition of 2024 are brimming with stories of businesses which are expanding, thriving, innovating, winning awards, and pushing the boundaries.

New for this year, we’ve launched a brand new spotlight on start-up businesses, shining a light on entrepreneurs taking the bravest of

all decisions to step out on their own. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we also hear from the boss of a local construction company who is reflecting on his company’s golden jubilee, and all the changes his industry has seen over the last 50 years.

The end-of-year deluge has turned our thoughts once again to the perils of flooding. Here in Shropshire, we have one of the UK’s leading flood experts, who tells us all about the work he has done to develop the first national groundwater risk map.

What else? There are picture specials from the Shropshire Law Society’s annual dinner, plus a ‘Posh Frocks’ charity fundraising gathering in Telford.

And our expert columnists tackle a wide range of issues this time – from international trade and artificial intelligence, to stamping out workplace harassment, and the importance of engaging with leaders in Whitehall to focus on issues that matter to shire counties, market towns and rural areas.

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce is hitting the ground running this year too, with plans to launch a new economic manifesto, and will officially unveil the 2024 edition of its annual business awards on January 25.

If you’re coming along to the launch event in Shrewsbury to find out more, I look forward to seeing you there.

As ever, if you’ve got something happening in your business that deserves to be celebrated or recognised, please don’t hesitate to drop us a line.

I’m not one for making bold new year’s resolutions, but I can at least pledge that we will be once again doing everything we can to champion all that is brilliant about the Shropshire business community this year.



Navigating the horizon: What's in store for 2024?

With a General Election looming, the influence of AI expanding, and skills shortages remaining a key issue for many Shropshire employers, how can businesses navigate a smooth path through the year? CARL JONES and ADAM PRINGLE report

It's a time of transition for the world of work. AI has well and truly entered the mainstream, skills demands are shifting, and global uncertainty continues to cast a shadow over economic patterns.

Businesses crave certainty, but it's been in short supply in recent months. And in the eyes of many analysts, that's unlikely to change this year. Shropshire employers find themselves operating in a dynamic landscape shaped by technological advancements, global shifts, and unprecedented challenges – not to mention the spectre of a change in Government looming large, with all the uncertainties that will bring. Here's a few of the key areas which experts tell us are expected to dominate the business landscape in 2024:

Technological Evolution
Technology remains a driving force, and its evolution continues to reshape many of our local industries. The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and automation is expected to accelerate this year. Companies that leverage these technologies strategically could gain a competitive edge by streamlining processes and unlocking new possibilities for innovation. Blockchain technology – the art of transparent information sharing – is poised to play a pivotal role, not just in finance but also in supply chain management, healthcare, and cyber security. The security it provides has the potential to revolutionise how businesses operate and build trust with their stakeholders. Virtual and augmented reality is becoming

more integrated into consumer experiences, opening up avenues for immersive marketing and product demonstrations. Businesses that harness the potential of AR and VR can create unique and engaging interactions with their audiences. **Remote Work and Hybrid Models**
The pandemic reshaped the way many Shropshire businesses approach their working week, and brought a big shift in attitudes to work-life balance. Remote work has become more than a temporary solution; it's a paradigm shift that is here to stay. In fact, the hybrid work model, combining remote and in-office work, is gaining traction as firms strive to strike a balance between flexibility and collaboration. Companies that invest in a robust remote work infrastructure foster a culture of flexibility and trust, and are expected to attract and retain top talent – indeed, anecdotal evidence from many Shropshire businesses is that they are struggling to keep their best staff unless they do. **Economic Recovery and Global Dynamics**
Notwithstanding the far-reaching ripples from ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, the global economy is on a gradual path to recovery post-pandemic. Although inflation is likely to remain at its current level for slightly longer than expected, it has failed to reach the more damaging heights predicted this time last year. When James Sproule, chief economist at Handelsbanken, visited Shrewsbury a few weeks ago to speak to businesses, he pointed to several positives. "Unemployment is going up, but we are not expecting it to go up to anything like the levels

that we saw, even in the global financial crisis where it peaked at just over 8%. We are thinking it will be under 6% at its peak." On the retail side, he pointed to the fact that out-of-town retail parks had been faring better than traditional town centres over the past few months. Why? "The way our statistics break down is that we look at High Streets, shopping malls and retail parks. It shows that retail parks are the areas which have seen footfall come back since Covid more strongly than the other areas. The least growth has been in shopping malls. "What a retail park does is offer a good mix of parking, the right kind of shops and cafes, and green space. That space is curated – it's made tempting for people to go there. You need to make a nice shopping experience. "If you end up with a lot of vacant shops, or charity shops, and parking is difficult, don't be surprised if people decide to shop online or elsewhere instead. People want to go where they are loved." The announcement of another significant increase in the National Living Wage will likely result in redundancies and price rises in many industry sectors, according to Alasdair Hobbs, an employment lawyer and managing director of Human Results HR consultants in Telford. He said: "Pressure will increase on margins in social care which will be bad news for those businesses who can't simply ask for more money from local authority budgets. "The unseen cost will be the pressure to raise the wages for those who are already on a higher salary than the National Living Wage who will be expected to be supervisors and trainers of the new starters."



Volatility in world economies and domestic politics will impact on 2024

Environmental, Social, and Sustainability Strategies
Sustainability and ethical business practices are no longer optional – they are imperative. Consumers are increasingly conscious of the environmental and social impact of the products and services they choose. More than that though, staff expectations have shifted too. Particularly in the case of younger workers, they want more than a wage – focusing on learning opportunities, a sense of belonging and work-life balance. Investors are also factoring in ESG criteria when making decisions, and businesses that align with these values may find themselves in a more favourable position to attract funding and investment. Rachel Laver, chief executive of the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership, said: "There needs to be support for businesses to help them do the right thing in regard to the environment and Net Zero. "The success of our Marches Energy Grant – which offers firms an energy audit and grant help to introduce energy-saving and Net Zero measures – shows that the appetite is there for such measures." **Cyber Security Challenges**
As technology advances, so does the threat to cyber security. The increasing sophistication of cyber-attacks poses a significant risk to businesses. The protection of sensitive data and maintenance of customer trust are paramount for Shropshire firms this year. Investing in robust cyber security measures and staying abreast of the latest threats will be crucial to safeguard operations and reputation. **Consumer Behaviour and Personalisation**
Understanding and adapting to evolving consumer behaviour is a perennial challenge for businesses. This year, it's predicted that the demand for 'personalised experiences' will intensify. Companies that make the most of data analytics to tailor their products and services to individual preferences may find themselves best positioned to capture market share and foster customer loyalty. **Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace**
Employee wellbeing has emerged as a critical factor in organisational success. This year, businesses that prioritise the health and wellbeing of their employees are likely to see improved productivity, reduced staff turnover, and a more positive workplace culture.



Sustainability strategies matter – to customers, and your staff

Mental health support, flexible work arrangements, and comprehensive wellness programmes are integral components of a holistic approach to employee wellbeing. Shropshire Business has been carrying out an online poll over the past few weeks to gauge the views of local employers on how they felt going into the New Year. Safe to say it's a really mixed picture. For example, when we asked how bosses were feeling about company prospects in 2024, 51% said they were more optimistic than last year, 39% felt the opposite, and 10% said confidence was about the same, Asked whether the Chancellor's Autumn statement had improved optimism, 50% said there had been no change, and the remainder were split down the middle. On the issue of recruitment, 56% said they were still struggling to recruit or retain good quality staff. There is clearly a real desire among Shropshire businesses to support other local businesses. When we asked how important this was, 79% said it was very important – and 21% said they would use more local suppliers if they could find what was needed on the doorstep. Ruth Ross is the chief executive of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, and she has set out five key objectives that she wants her organisation to achieve in 2024. Speaking at the Chamber's annual meeting, at the Mercure Albrighton Hall Hotel near Shrewsbury, she highlighted key areas for growth, including increasing membership engagement in surveys and research, and growing participation in events by 20%. "We also want to raise our voices to be better heard in Government, and have created a policy manifesto which we will be launching early in the New Year, setting out our goals. We are also going to be running some policy forums so members can help shape our policy work." Driving skills development across Shropshire, helping businesses with digital transformation and innovation, and championing sustainability and corporate social responsibility were also named as priorities for 2024. Ruth said: "We want to generate opportunities for members to connect, share best practices, and build relationships. "We will also progress our Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) research, obtaining in-depth employer feedback, introduce other opportunities for upskilling and workforce skills enhancement, and foster partnerships with educational institutions." Chamber president Piran Littleton said: "It's clear that we have a very exciting year ahead of us." Which brings us to politics. This year is almost certain to see a General Election, and with the Tories trailing badly in the polls, Labour is looking odds-on to win Sir Keir Starmer the keys to 10 Downing Street. Our Shropshire Business poll also asked employers when they thought a General Election should be held. The overwhelming majority felt it should be held sooner rather than later, in the first quarter of this year. Having said that, there has also been a broad welcome for many of the measures introduced by Chancellor Jeremy Hunt in his Autumn statement.



Piran Littleton and Ruth Ross at the Chamber AGM

Anton Gunter, managing director at Global Freight Services in Telford, said: “We very much welcome the package of measures announced to support business growth for SMEs and in particular the move to strengthen support for exporting.

“The opportunities for small businesses to export their products and services globally are huge, whether they operate from a garden shed or multiple production sites, and so anything that encourages more businesses to trade internationally has to be a good thing.

“As a nation we need to be more ambitious and making sure companies can sell their goods into global markets confidently is essential.”

Nathan Blissett at Dwello Mortgages in Telford, welcomed the extension of the Mortgage Guarantee Scheme which supports the availability of 95% Loan-to-Value mortgage products.

“This scheme, which has already proved helpful to so many, will now run for a further 18 months to help prospective borrowers to get onto the property ladder. There are still challenges ahead in the property market but this is certainly good news for buyers.”

Steven Owen, managing director of Knockin-based construction company Pave Aways, said he ‘wholeheartedly’ welcomed the focus on business and growth, particularly business tax cuts and the extension of the full expensing tax relief scheme to support investment.

“I also welcome the changes to the planning system. The country needs new homes and we need to get the property market moving again, so anything which removes barriers to planning and development is a positive move.”

Bekki Phillips, of In-Comm Training, said it was refreshing to see vocational learning play such a prominent role in Government policy.

“The headline will no doubt be the £50 million additional investment in pilots that encourage more apprenticeships into engineering and manufacturing. This is music to our ears as a specialist provider.

“If there was one thing missing from the skills announcement, it was the urgent need to take the training levy a step further, so that it goes beyond apprenticeships and funds qualifications and courses specific to industry needs.”

Karen McLellan, financial director of iconsys, a specialist in the integration of automation, control systems, robotics, and autonomous vehicles, felt the statement was a ‘definite attempt to improve business confidence’.

“Without doubt, the permanent implementation of the ‘super-deduction’ scheme will be welcomed by many given the cash flow benefit and relative ease of the scheme. This will be a huge boost to improve the viability of future investment plans for many of our clients and our own ongoing growth and expansion plans.

“That said, this must be balanced against high interest rates which won’t be falling any time soon, which may counter investment plans. The OBR have now downgraded economic growth rates for 2024 and 2025, and the Bank of England are predicting that the economy will be stagnant for some time to come. Therefore, whilst it’s great to see this announcement, we need a stable economic framework to be able to truly capitalise on it.

Wayne Carter, managing director of Telford manufacturing company Fabweld Steel Products, felt the funding boost for the manufacturing sector was a ‘pleasant surprise’ and particularly



Nathan Blissett, Dwello Mortgages



Cash flow – Karen McLellan from iconsys

welcomed the focus to support plans for Net Zero transition.

“Supply chain issues caused by Covid and volatile energy prices highlighted how vulnerable our industry was to geopolitical and world events. That’s why we wanted to take back control – with investment in the greenest way possible – to benefit the planet, the business, customers and employees.

Seb Slater, executive director of Shrewsbury BID, said: “Along with other BIDs across the UK, we have been arguing for a number of years that business rates have risen to incredibly challenging levels so this increased discount is very welcome.

“We have calculated that around 313 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in the town



Steven Owen, managing director, Pave Aways



Seb Slater, executive director of Shrewsbury BID

centre have been eligible to receive the 75% discount, which is a welcome boost in the face of rising operating costs.

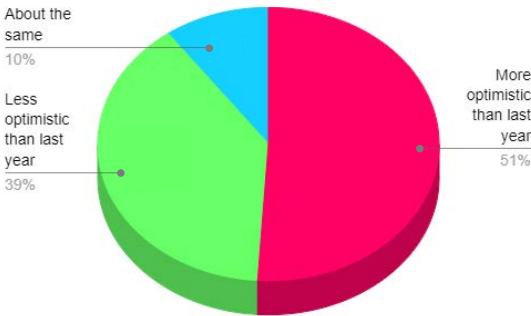
“The Chancellor’s statement contained good news for the hospitality industry, with the freeze in alcohol duty sure to be welcomed as long as it is able to be reflected in the prices seen by traders.”

More than 300 traders in Shrewsbury town centre have been eligible for a 75% discount on business rates since April, which is now being extended for another year.

● **How are you feeling about the year ahead? Are there any major milestones, opportunities, challenges or transitions on the calendar? We’d love to share your views. Email editor@shropshirebiz.com**

Shropshire Business carried out a poll regarding 2024. Here is the feedback in pie chart form:

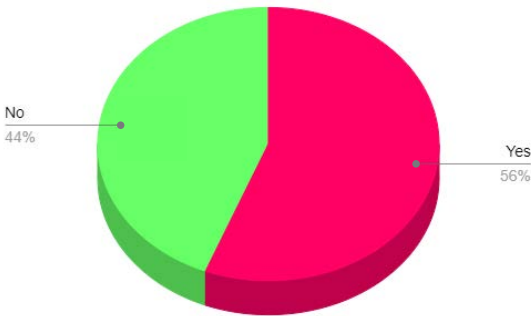
How are you feeling about your company's prospects in 2024?



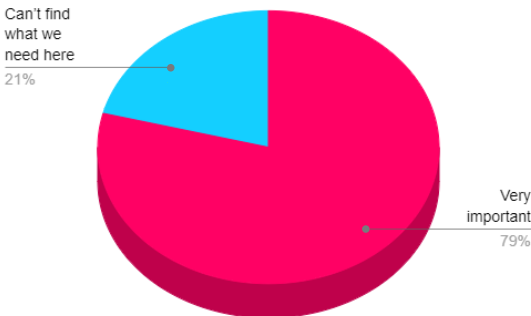
How are you feeling about your company's prospects for 2024 after the Chancellor's Autumn statement?



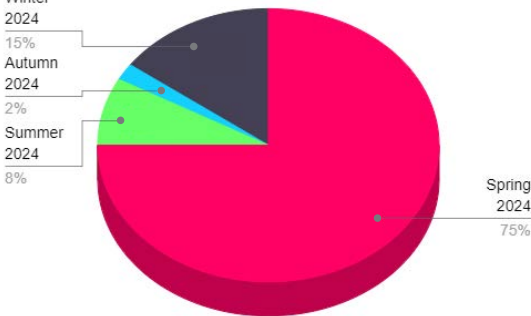
Are you finding it difficult to either recruit or retain good quality staff?



How important is it for your business to 'buy local' and support other companies?



When do you think we need a General Election?



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Awards night is the largest event on the Shropshire business calendar



The post-awards party is a colourful occasion

County celebrates the best local businesses

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce
will be officially launching its
2024 Business Awards on January
25, with new-look categories and
criteria to reflect the ever-changing
local economy.

A launch event will be held at the Mercure
Albrighton Hall Hotel near Shrewsbury when
businesses will get chance to meet and hear from
past winners, plus judges, sponsors and event
organisers.

This will be the 24th year of the awards,
which have grown into one of the largest of their
kind in the UK. More than 13,000 people have
attended the black-tie presentation evenings
since the first event was staged in 2001.

Kelly Riedel, events and training manager at
Shropshire Chamber, said: "The awards are now
firmly established as the largest annual business
celebration in the county, and winning a trophy is
a real badge of honour.

"We know that the business climate
continues to be challenging for many local
employers, so it's more important than ever to
celebrate and recognise our success stories.

"We will be explaining the entry, shortlisting
and judging processes at the launch event, to
ensure that businesses get a real understanding
of how our teams of independent judges reach
their decisions.

"We've made a few tweaks to build on the
success of last year's event, following feedback
and suggestions which we invited from our
members and stakeholders - and we can't wait to
reveal what's in store."

The launch event will be a chance for
businesses to find out about categories and
criteria for 2024, which will include a new award
for the retail, leisure and hospitality industries,
and the introduction of a growth award to
recognise top-performers.



Aico of Oswestry is the reigning company of the year

Popular categories such as company of the
year, best new business and best small business
will be returning alongside categories recognising
innovation, customer service, and businesses
giving back to their local communities.

Entries for the awards will open on the day
of the launch event, with details to be found
at www.shropshirechamberbusinessawards.com. The 2024 award winners will be revealed at
Telford's International Centre on Friday June 21.

Previous winners of the coveted company of
the year title include Aico of Oswestry, Grainger
& Worrall from Bridgnorth, Grocontinental of
Whitchurch, McConnel of Ludlow, Salop Leisure
from Shrewsbury, and Telford businesses Lyreco,
Dodd Group, Smartwater and Reconomy.

● You can view the huge picture gallery
from last year's awards night at <https://shropshirechamberbusinessawards.com/gallery-2023/>



Chamber chief executive **Ruth Ross**
speaking at last year's awards

Halesfield manufacturer is under new ownership

Telford-based Fleet Design, a specialist manufacturer of chevron and ‘Chapter 8’ kits used by most major fleet operators in the UK, is under new ownership.

The Halesfield-based firm has been taken over by self-adhesive materials maker Metamark, which has its headquarters in Lancaster. The value of the deal has not been disclosed.

Fleet Design was formed to ‘disrupt and improve what was once a commoditised market’ and its products are a common sight on the UK’s road network ensuring that commercial and highway maintenance vehicles can be seen in all conditions.

Managing director and founder Duncan Richards said: “As an entrepreneur, I’ve always been driven by a vision of seeing something I’ve created reaching a milestone in its development that takes it forward with the resources it needs to grow and really deliver its potential.

“That’s now happened. I’m thrilled at the idea of what the future holds for all involved, including the customers we’ve attracted by revolutionising the way reflective markings are made and sold.

“The acquisition is a great move for Metamark and it looks just as bright from my side of the table too.”

With much of Metamark’s existing materials production being sold to producers of vehicle liveries, the company says the synergy will deliver ‘immediate and positive results’.

Metamark chief executive Paul French said: “The additional expertise and conversion capabilities we’re building into Metamark’s business will help us serve the needs of more customers and to deliver our class-leading materials into new markets.

“Metamark’s existing customer base has an appetite for specialised conversion output and reflective markings too. As part of the Metamark family, our new division immediately has access to a whole swathe of new customers that may have been difficult to find in the past.”

Is this the way to . . . the official opening?

Celebrity singer Tony Christie was in Shrewsbury to cut the ribbon at a rebranded fashion store.

Debbie Carvell bought her first Shrewsbury shop, Mystique Lingerie and Swimwear, in 2019 and has now rebranded as Carvell Lingerie and Swimwear.

The former teacher loved retail so much she has since bought a second shop called Carol Grant, which has been renamed Carvell on the Square.

“As much as I loved the education sector, I haven’t looked back and love shopping, choosing beautiful clothes for people and sending them off with a smile every day of the week – it is a very special job,” she said.



Tony Christie cuts the ribbon at Debbie's shop in The Square

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Bridging the gap in Oswestry




The bridge installation spanning the A5

This is the moment a 55-metre-long bridge, weighing 68 tonnes, was lowered into place over the A5 at Mile End in Oswestry – by a 1,000 tonne crane.

Led by Shrewsbury-based Beaver Bridges, the bridge has been designed to allow easy and safe access to the new Oswestry Innovation Park, and to link the public rights of way either side of the A5.

On-site activity is continuing with the installation of around 200 metres of ramps, drainage and landscaping, which will see the completion of the works by the Spring.

The bridge installation marked the second key development to the area following the Mile End junction improvements completed by Shropshire Council.



On-site activity will be completed by Spring

Ambitious group adds award-winning firm

An award-winning Shropshire planning and design firm is under new ownership.

Halls, the independent firm of estate agents, chartered surveyors, auctioneers and valuers, has acquired Shenton Owen Planning and Design, based in Whitchurch.

The company says it has been purchased to underpin Halls’ drive to grow its busy planning and development department.

David Owen, managing director of Shenton Owen and a Fellow of the Chartered Association of Building Engineers, will add valuable experience to the existing planning and development team at Halls’ head office at Battlefield, Shrewsbury.

Halls’ managing director Jon Quinn said: “To grow our planning and development department we need the expertise of the best people in the business and David Owen certainly fits the bill.

“I have known David for around 20 years and his vast experience will be invaluable to our expanding team which will provide him with the back-up and support he needs.

“David joins as a consultant and will work closely with Paul Watson, our senior planning consultant, and the rest of the team.

“We have identified a number of areas where the public could be better served by a dynamic and forward-thinking planning department, and the acquisition of Shenton Owen will allow Halls to become the go-to firm for any such enquiries.

“We pride ourselves in having a sustainable approach to our business, which all hinges on providing our clients with honest advice specific to their best interests.”

David, who has run his own businesses since 1988, is delighted to join up with Halls. “Selling my business was an easy decision because Halls is such a widely-respected name and it provides continuity for my clients.

“I have worked in the trade for many years, and Halls has always had a high standing in the region. I shall still be working as a consultant for Halls and will have their team behind me as we grow the department and attract even more, good quality people to join the team.”

Originally from Caersws in Mid Wales, David worked in surveying and building control for Shropshire County Council, Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council, and North Shropshire District Council before starting his own business.



Halls managing director Jon Quinn (right) with David Owen following the signing of the deal to acquire Shenton Owen Planning and Design



Dr Paul Ellis outside the office in Bellstone



Augmented reality – in seconds, Geosmart can let you know the flood risk of your property

Keeping score to identify the UK's watery areas of concern

HENRY CARPENTER meets one of the UK's leading flood experts who has developed the first national groundwater risk map

These days, in the depths of an English winter, barely a week seems to go by without the national weather forecast concluding with a 'risk of flooding' somewhere or other.

Thanks in part to climate change, the sight of miles of fields transformed into massive lakes from the train window feels commonplace now, whereas it used to be a rarity.

Homes suffer. Businesses suffer. And for many, the rains bring an annual ordeal which is both emotionally and financially crippling. Various towns seem to crop up time and again as victims of rivers bursting their banks . . . one of which is Shrewsbury.

So it's fitting that one of the UK's leading flood experts is explaining the nuances of groundwater, surface water and overall flooding – and how they affect society in different ways – from his office in the county town. There is also dark humour to be found in the fact that our discussion is taking place smack in the middle of one of the named storms at the tail end of 2023 with rain hammering against the window.

Dr Paul Ellis is the managing director of GeoSmart Information, an environmental consultancy which specialises in flood risk, drainage, groundwater, and contaminated land.

GeoSmart's expertise – based on experience, research and pioneering data systems – is sought



Dr Paul Ellis is the managing director of GeoSmart Information, an environmental consultancy

right across the country, and the team helps individuals and organisations ranging from property professionals, local authorities and lenders to insurers and asset managers.

Give Paul any property address in the country, and after a few seconds on the computer he will give its flooding risk score. He points out the shaded areas on digital maps – the darker the shading, the heavier the flood risk.

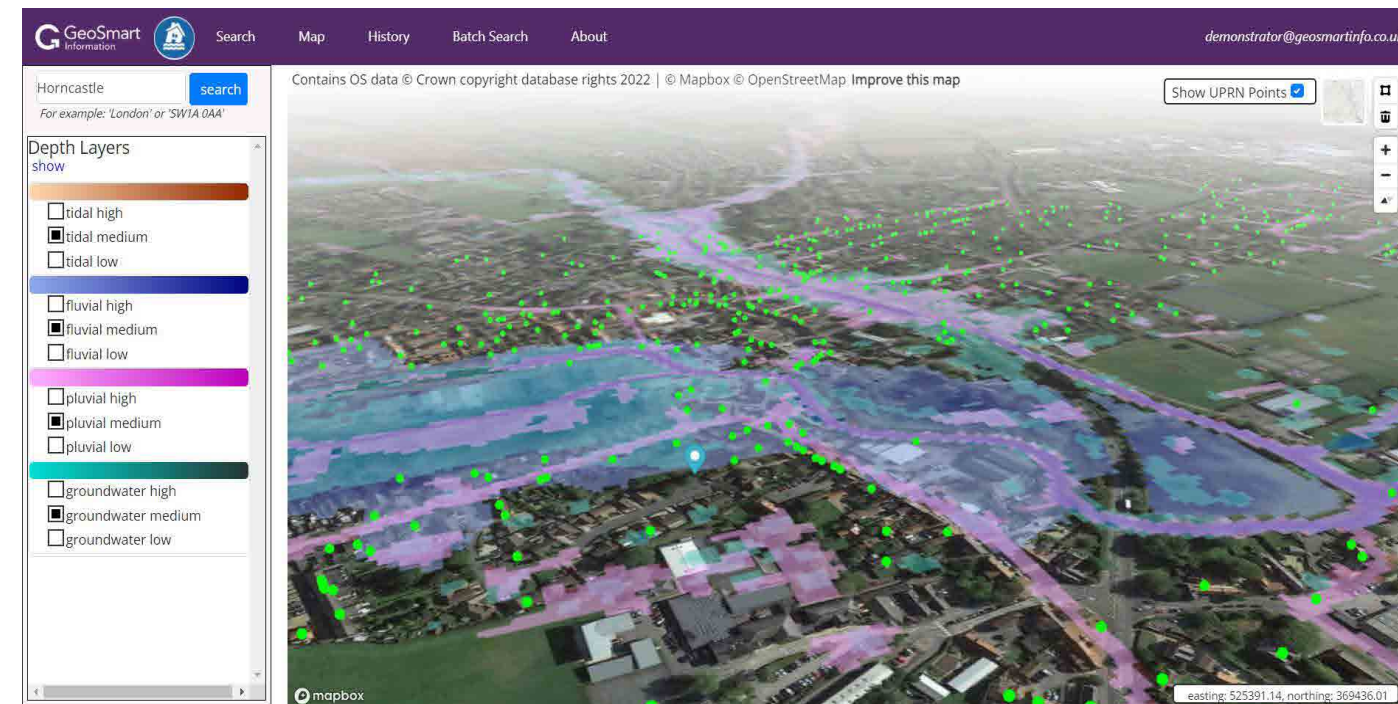
"We made a significant investment to develop our new FloodSmart Analytics data and

tool capable of mapping the cost of flood risk for all UK properties," he explains in his office in Bellstone.

"Our research and development department have created this well-calibrated system which measures flooding risk from groundwater, surface water, rivers and tides.

"We can identify which areas flood and how deep the water will be, which is particularly relevant to the UK planning system.

"It also works out the added costs of flooding



GeoSmart Information– FloodSmart Analytics Online – Horncastle pictured above, with Purley bottom left and Shrewsbury bottom right

to individual properties which is obviously useful for insurance purposes. Every property in the UK has a flood score, and this allows the right advice to be given to owners of homes and businesses over strategic planning."

When Paul talks about advice, it is all about early intervention with GeoSmart. So how does this early intervention for home and business owners actually work?

"Our team evaluates environmental risks and opportunities using our in-house data sets," he explains.

"Data is summarised in a short technical report, and if the property is identified as being at risk or has suffered from flooding, a range of mitigation options are available.

"Our clients are aware that asset value is affected by environmental risk, which is clearly an important consideration when taking a loan, mortgage or planning for future equity release."

This former geologist, who got a PhD from the University of Birmingham in the early 2000s, is eminently qualified in this field, and you get the sense there is little he doesn't know about flooding, drainage and contamination issues.

After his degree, he moved to Shrewsbury to work for environmental consultancy Hafren Water, before moving to ESI, the parent company of GeoSmart.

"We put together the first national groundwater field risk map," he says. "We could see that there was a gap in the market for big

data – that was the future. About eight years ago, we rebranded to GeoSmart and concentrated on using tech rather than a human resource. We created data sets able to view the whole of the UK in five-metre resolution. This was the new model, and we were now going beyond a traditional consultancy."

The direction Paul has taken the firm in has evidently been a successful one. Trade is increasingly brisk, and in 2023 the business reported revenue of £1.85 million – up from £1.5 million the previous year – with its flood risk consultants recording a 58% rise in demand from clients over the past 12 months.

The sustained growth was largely attributed to local authorities insisting on more detailed information from developers when they submit planning applications for residential homes. A significant portion of flood risk work also comes from large sites and clients reviewing sites for due diligence purposes.

"Instead of asking only for flood risk assessments, local authorities and flood risk officers are also increasingly asking for further detail such as sequential tests," says Paul.

"These compare the site proposed for development with other available sites within the council area to establish if the development can be placed elsewhere, as well as flood warning and evacuation plans and sustainable drainage strategies."

The consultancy, which met its overall 30%

growth target in the past year, saw its sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) work increase by 25%, while contaminated land work rose by 19%.

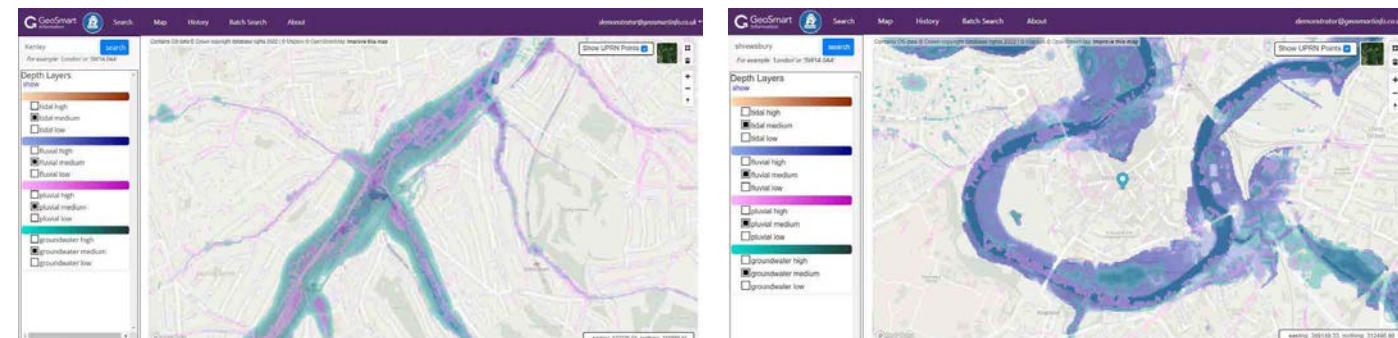
Staff numbers have increased from 24 to 28, it has taken on more office space in Shrewsbury's Old Bank Buildings where it has been based for the past six years, and it has also opened a satellite Manchester office. Busy times.

Paul reckons that as new legislation is introduced this coming year – with Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 expected to make the incorporation of SuDS into new developments mandatory in England – demand for SuDS advice and reporting will grow even more.

"The schedule will provide a framework for the approval and adoption of sustainable drainage systems to regulate rainfall, decrease the volume of water flowing into sewers, and storm overflow discharges," he says.

"This is where we envisage strong growth in our consultancy side of the business. As our success continues and our revenue increases, we'll also continue to invest in the business and to innovate, bringing new tools and ideas to market. Our new business plan was accepted by the Board and this next financial year should be both transformative and profitable."

I leave feeling that the contrast between the sunny disposition of Paul and his team at GeoSmart, and the storm raging outside, could not be more pronounced.



Importance of securing data

How sure are you that your company's sensitive data is secure? And when did you last test it out?

Those are some of the key questions posed by Securing Shropshire, a new county-based initiative designed to help businesses and charities plug gaps in their cyber security.

It's being run by the team at Shrewsbury-based Cyber Data & Protection, which has clients throughout the UK with particular focus on the charity and education sectors.

The UK Government promotes 'Cyber Essentials' as a baseline standard for good cyber security – yet the Securing Shropshire team says only 8% of more than 1,000 local organisations checked had this certification.

Director Ian Simons said: "It is always very frustrating to come across organisations with holes in their cyber security and, as someone who is Shropshire born and bred, it would be fantastic to see Shropshire become known as the most secure county in the UK – we can dream."

To help drive this initiative forward, Mark Morris has joined the team as business development manager, and Wayne Howells has been appointed as business development director.

Ian said: "We have ambitious plans to grow within our specialist sectors of charities,



Mark Morris, Wayne Howells and Ian Simons

education, legal and hospitality, and to increase our customer base within Shropshire. I am confident that Wayne and Mark with their experience and skills will help us to achieve our goals."

Mark said: "I am looking forward to spreading the message as to why cyber security shouldn't just be thought of after a breach or attack as is so often the case, but instead with a secure by design approach."

Securing Shropshire has two service packages which meet the cyber needs of every Shropshire organisation. In addition, Securing Shropshire has all the cyber information an organisation might need in one place.

The service includes a set of comprehensive data protection/cyber security templates and

documentation, e-learning for staff, assessments to ensure good practice and set discounts on more.

The team say: "Cyber security isn't a technology issue, it's a core business issue."

"A question you should ask yourself is who is driving good practice, innovation and high performance when it comes to data security? Is it your managed service provider, IT company, or an internal IT team? Who is holding them to account and checking that from a security standpoint they are delivering for you?"

"Can your organisation afford to put all its eggs in one basket when it comes to IT and security? We believe that most CEOs, when they consider and understand this risk, wouldn't be happy to do this."

What a milestone year

It's been a milestone year for Telford-based Instaloft including the appointment of a new managing director to take the company forward in 2024.

Combined with sister companies Instaspark and Garageflex, the company predicted a £22.5 million turnover for last year – a 57% increase in group revenue on 2022.

The company, which has grown from a one-man-band to the largest in the UK, has racked up over 40,000 loft boarding installations since its inception, and is poised to turn over £30 million in the next three years.

Central to the firm's ambitious growth plans is the appointment of managing director Neil Stothert. Further boosting its Board, the group has also appointed new operations director Steve Caves, with a new finance director also set to join the firm.

The firm has also hired group marketing manager Poppy Mackay, and appointed Joann Carr as customer experience manager.

Along with the slew of new appointments, CEO and founder Rob Stone is continuing his close work with Instaloft's sister companies, Instaspark and GarageFlex as the business continues to scale.



Rob Stone, founder and director of Instaloft

Investments in both customer and staff safety have seen the firm become trailblazers in setting new standards for asbestos surveying in loft boarding, having worked closely with the Health and Safety Executive over the last 18 months to build a process that has now become the benchmark for loft boarding companies nationwide.

Rob Stone said: "I'm pleased to welcome so many talented new people into the business, whose skills and experience are already driving

us forward into our next phase of growth. This year has been one of our most successful to date. We've continued to expand and diversify our services, grow our sister companies, and continue to innovate within our sector."

Headquartered in Telford with 11 depots nationwide including Exeter, Newport, Reading, Colchester, Peterborough, Yorkshire and Nottingham, Instaloft plans to set up a further three depots, beginning with one in Norwich.

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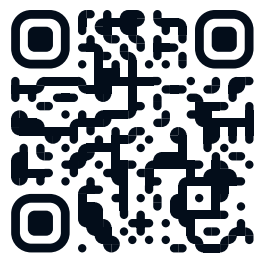
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Joe Newton

Happy New Year! We hope you all had a fantastic Christmas break filled with joy and laughter.

One of the highlights of my Christmas break was the Connexis party, which offered a unique twist on the typical meal and drinks formula.

This year, we chose an exciting team-building adventure at Shrewsbury Prison, specifically an Escape Room experience.

Despite inadvertently choosing one of the coldest days of winter, the chilly atmosphere only added to the excitement of our prison break.

We were divided into two groups and placed in separate cells, setting the stage for our daring escape.

The cells were meticulously designed to look grimy and foreboding, and the only clue given by our "guard" before he left was a cryptic hint about something important being hidden in the toilet – a task that fell upon our intrepid apprentice, Dan!

Interestingly, we hadn't given much thought to team composition, but it turned out that we were evenly matched.

It might have been an intriguing experiment to pit engineers against sales and back-office staff, but both teams showcased a mix of talents.

Our Managing Director, Bill, who comes from a sales background, observed that engineers were quick to analyse and solve problems, while our Office Manager, Amanda, brought incredible organisation skills, diligently recording all the clues we uncovered.

Bill humorously remarked: "I could see how representatives from various functions within the business brought different skills to the table.

"Although my interpersonal sales skills didn't contribute much, I felt a bit like a spare part."

However, in activities like these, there can only be one winning team, and Dan and I were determined to claim victory over our boss. Our determination paid off, and we emerged as the triumphant team.

After our exhilarating escape room experience, we had the opportunity to explore



Bill Rowland (managing director), Steve (Amanda's partner), Amanda Stevens (office manager) and Tom Capstick (technical engineer)



Kim (Joe's wife), Joe Newton (technical director), Elise (Dan's partner) and Dan Tattersall (apprentice)

the prison. The prison was replete with fascinating props and insights into the life of inmates, but some of our party members

couldn't resist geeking out over the poor CAT5e cable runs and Wi-Fi access point locations. I also learned that the last person to be executed at Shrewsbury Prison had both lived and committed a crime just a few streets away from where I grew up – a chilling revelation.

It was a fantastic evening and a delightful way to wrap up an exceptionally busy year. Our Escape Room adventure served as a fantastic example of how local businesses can provide unique and engaging team-building opportunities for companies like ours, fostering camaraderie and teamwork among employees while offering unforgettable experiences in our community.

We highly recommend this activity for your next team-building adventure.

Cheers to a prosperous and collaborative year ahead!

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connexis

Joe Newton is Technical Director at Connexis, based in Telford



How to spot greenwashing

Businesses that over-state their eco credentials leave themselves open to accusations of “greenwashing”, according to a Shropshire sustainability consultant.

Coca-Cola, Danone and Nestlé have all been accused of greenwashing in recent months after claiming that their plastic bottles are “100% recycled”, despite knowing that the lids are not recycled. Sue Burnell, from Business Net Zero, said: “It’s no good businesses just talking the talk when it comes to their efforts to be more environmentally conscious.

“They need to walk the walk as well. If you make claims that aren’t true you will get found out, and that is likely to be hugely damaging to your perceived integrity and, ultimately, your brand.

“Your road to Net Zero should be taken one step at a time. You won’t be able to achieve it in one go, so there is no need to pretend that you are further on than you are. Be honest about what you have achieved so far and what further steps you have planned – your customers will think far more of your genuine efforts to do better than a glossy unrealistic claim that will fall apart under scrutiny.”

Sue said it was important to break the sustainability journey down into manageable chunks, and advised seeking expert help to plan the transformation.

“Very few businesses are in a position to claim that they are at Net Zero already, and it can seem an unachievable goal when you first start the process.

“It’s important to take small steps to achieve results. Effective planning, a well thought out strategy and making sure all your employees are on board with what you are trying to achieve will all stand you in good stead.

“We’ve seen organisations get so anxious about green washing that they’ve resorted to “green hushing” instead – but hiding your sustainability targets and successes is likely to backfire, as it will make you look inauthentic and less than honest.



Sue Burnell – very few businesses can honestly claim the status Net Zero

“Talking to a sustainability expert right at the start of the process can make sure you don’t waste time on projects that are doomed to fail, or become so overwhelmed by the size of the task that you quit before you’ve properly started.”

Sue said sitting down with a sustainability consultant could help businesses identify the small, manageable steps which could add up to a significant improvement in eco credentials such as securing employee buy-in, reducing waste, and “cleaning up” the supply chain.

2023: what a rollercoaster



More than a million people signed up for the Shropshire-led TechTimeOut campaign in 2023



Hollie Whittles

When I’m travelling on business it makes me reflect on how lucky we are to have established our base in the beautiful and scenic county of Shropshire.

The year 2023 was a rollercoaster of challenges and opportunities. Reflecting on the past year, it’s evident that resilience and adaptability have been the cornerstones of success for businesses in our region.

A memorable event for me that celebrated local successes was on International Women’s Day, which was a collaborative event jointly organised by FragglesWorks, the Marches Growth Hub, the Federation of Small Businesses and Shropshire Chamber of Commerce which was a sell-out success.

The impact of global events has rippled through the local business landscape, and as we tread into 2024, strategic foresight becomes more crucial than ever. One of the defining aspects of 2023 was the continued integration of digital technologies. As well as our company Purple Frog helping other organisations to digitally transform using AI, we find ourselves

embracing online platforms for marketing, sales, and communication which are paramount to growing our own business.

The pandemic accelerated the shift towards remote work, presenting both challenges and advantages for small businesses. Navigating the nuances of a remote workforce while maintaining productivity required innovative solutions. In 2024, businesses can expect this trend to persist, with a heightened focus on refining remote work policies, looking after mental health, and leveraging collaborative tools to foster team cohesion.

As a proud ambassador for TechTimeOut, this year saw them partner with Mental Health First Aid England and achieve record levels of national sign ups, congratulations to Steph and the team for making this happen.

2023 witnessed a surge in sustainable practices, with consumers increasingly prioritising eco-friendly products and ethical business operations. For local businesses, this highlighted the need for environmentally conscious strategies. Looking ahead, 2024 is likely to see a further push towards sustainability, urging businesses to adopt green practices, reduce carbon footprints, and align with the growing eco-conscious consumer base. This is something the Marches Growth Hub has provided business support on which we ourselves leveraged, and we now have an accurate carbon footprint assessment, allowing us to plan for becoming Net Zero. This is vital for us to run the business efficiently and when tendering for new opportunities.

The skills gap issue still remains, with lots of businesses reporting the challenge of retention and recruitment. Through my national policy role with the Federation of Small Businesses, this

year I’ve discussed these issues at Westminster with Kemi Badenoch (Secretary of State for Business and Trade), Gillian Keegan (Secretary of State for Education), Bridget Phillipson (Shadow Secretary of State for Education), and I also visited The Treasury to speak with the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s policy team.

In 2024, businesses need to continue supporting schools and curriculum development and stay abreast of new apprenticeship offers to help scale up the skills that are crucial for businesses aiming to thrive. One simple way to do this is to get in touch with the Marches Careers Hub which co-ordinates this nationally for our area.

The importance of a robust digital presence became apparent in 2023, influencing strategic reporting, customer acquisition, and brand visibility. As we look forward to 2024, investing in AI and data analytics, better e-commerce capabilities and enhancing online customer experiences will be pivotal for businesses in our region to remain competitive in an evolving marketplace. I chair the UK&I EmTech Committee for CompTIA and one of our aims is to demystify emerging technologies and aid adoption nationally.

In conclusion, the local business landscape has weathered the storms and floods of 2023, emerging stronger and more adaptable. As we venture into 2024, business owners in the county must remain agile, embracing technological advancements, sustainability practices, and a proactive approach to regulatory changes. The journey ahead is challenging, but with strategic planning and a resilient spirit, organisations are poised for success in the dynamic year that lies ahead. I wish you all great success for the forthcoming year.

Hollie Whittles is a director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford



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SCAN ME







An illustrative view – looking south east towards the proposed wall and amphitheatre from the north of Roushill Park (looking away from the river)

Fresh look down by the riverside

The first plans have been submitted for the long-awaited redevelopment of Shrewsbury’s riverside area.

The project, led by Shropshire Council and its development manager RivingtonHark, is set to transform the area between the River Severn, Darwin Centre, Roushill and Raven Meadows.

The first of four ‘phase one’ planning applications has now been submitted. Funded by almost £19 million of Levelling Up money from UK Government, the plans would see the demolition of the Riverside shopping centre and former Riverside medical practice.

This would pave the way for a landmark new public park adjacent to Roushill, helping to breathe new life into the area, creating a green and attractive public meeting place, and improving biodiversity in the town

centre. The park will feature play equipment for visitors of different ages, as well as a dedicated events and performance area.

Future ‘phase one’ public consultations and subsequent planning applications are already being developed for the wider Smithfield Riverside masterplan, which has been designed by FaulknerBrowns Architects. These evolving proposals include modern offices, new homes and a new leisure offer with restaurants and a cinema.

Ian Nellins, deputy leader of Shropshire Council, said: “A great deal of work has taken place to get us to this stage and we are excited to submit our first of several planning applications, as we look to begin the transformation of this key area in our town centre and after many years and much talk, this starts becoming a reality.

“It’s been great to see the plans receive such an overwhelmingly positive response. The project is the heartbeat of our plans to attract new visitors, residents, businesses and jobs into Shrewsbury, and growing the county’s economy.

“Although this specific application relates to the proposed public park on Roushill, it was great to start conversations about the wider masterplan in general and future phases.

“We appreciate that there is a clear desire from the public to understand how public transport and car travel will change over the coming years in-and-around the town centre. These early conversations will serve us well as we enter formal public consultation on the Movement Strategy in 2024.”

Tom Smith, director of Spacehub, added: “Since the public consultation, we have used the feedback to help fine tune our proposals for the park.

“In particular, the play elements in the park have been made far more robust and natural in appearance, making use of solid and sculptural play features rather than traditional children’s play equipment.

“This design ethos that ties back to the geology of Shropshire seems to align closer to what a lot of people desire from a town centre park in Shrewsbury. This also responds to requests to ensure that the play equipment is robust enough to deal with flooding and any subsequent clean-up without being damaged.

“On the topic of flooding in the area, we have also introduced a greater level of rain garden attenuation area to ensure that the park can play a really meaningful role in the sustainable urban drainage and flood management strategy.”

The first Smithfield Riverside public consultation, which ran for four weeks across October and November, saw around 15,000 people engage online, 500 in-person engagements and over 400 people left direct feedback. The overall public and stakeholder response to the plans has been positive, with the plans for the park receiving 75% support and the wider masterplan vision receiving 73% support.

Spencer Winter, project director at RivingtonHark, said: “It’s been great to view the positive comments on the proposals and see that the majority of the public and regional stakeholders are aligned with our thinking, and we’re all pulling in the same direction. The comments and opinions we received have helped influence and shape the application.”

Some key themes regarding the new park that came from the public consultation included a desire for more pedestrianisation in the area, the need for a safe and well-managed space, a clear plan for regular flooding, and enhanced accessibility for all.

Historic hotel set to be protected

Telford & Wrekin Council is beginning court proceedings to save and protect the historic Royal Victoria Hotel in Newport.

The 193-year-old former hotel on St Mary’s Street, a listed building, was granted planning permission for conversion into residential flats, but the work was never completed by its private owners.

Due to concerns over public safety, the council gained a court order last January to secure the site and scaffolding, to remove danger to the public. As the work was not completed within the court’s timescales, the council carried out the work itself, and is in the process of recovering the costs.

To protect the structure of the listed building, a repairs notice was also served on the owner in July. As no action was taken, the council’s planning committee considered there were ‘no other reasonable measures’ and agreed to the compulsory purchase of the Royal Victoria Hotel.

The hotel’s owner, Roger Brock, told the BBC he would “rigorously defend” attempts

to buy the hotel by compulsory purchase, and said the council had refused his application for demolition of the site.

Councillor Richard Overton, Telford & Wrekin Council’s deputy leader said: “We have tried on a number of occasions to work with the owner to protect this listed building and bring forward suitable development of the site.

“We are hugely disappointed that the site was mothballed with no maintenance, threatening public safety and the fabric of the building, and despite serving a notice to carry out repairs to the building, the owner has taken no action.

“Throughout the process, we have reassured the public that our aim is to protect the building and we have no intention to allow it to be de-listed and demolished. As a result of inaction and the deliberate and purposeful neglect by the owner, we now have no alternative but to apply for a compulsory purchase of the Royal Victoria Hotel, in order to secure the building, protect it for the future and ensure public safety. It is our intention to seek the compulsory purchase at ‘minimal consideration.’”

National award for a rising star



Aleesha Skett with her Young Business Woman of the Year Award

A former apprentice who became a senior human resource consultant in just three years, has scooped a national Young Business Woman of the Year award.

Aleesha Skett, from Donnington, completed a two-year apprenticeship with The HR Dept Shropshire before being promoted to a leading role as a senior HR consultant in 2023, working with local SMEs across Shropshire.

The National Business Women’s Awards 2023 announced the winners at their annual ceremony held in the Hilton Hotel in Wembley. Now in their seventh year, the Awards strive to offer business women a platform to celebrate their incredible achievements.



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The former Greenhouse site
Significant site let to merchandiser

Halls Commercial has announced a 'significant' letting at the former Greenhouse site in Shrewsbury.

National Merchandise, the UK's largest independent entertainment merchandiser, has taken on the former vehicle workshops and rear yard area.

It means the former Greenhouse car and van dealership at Old Potts Way is now fully let. The site has showrooms, offices, workshops, and welfare facilities, with a total site area of approximately three acres.

The latest letting was negotiated at a rent above £110,000 per year.

James Evans, head of Halls Commercial, said: "This is yet another brilliant commercial letting by our practice, demonstrating the confidence in the commercial market for the right property in the right town."

"It provides a significant job boost to Shrewsbury. We extend our best wishes for their success to National Merchandise."

Renewable energy training



Luke Foster in the Retrofit Skills Lab at Telford College

A series of new renewable energy training programmes have been launched at Telford College to bring electricians up to date with the latest solar and battery power technology, electric vehicle charging and industry regulations.

Four short programmes are running in the college's newly-equipped Retrofit Skills Lab at the Wellington campus, which is kitted out with battery storage units, solar power systems and electric car charging points.

A two-week bootcamp is also available covering solar power, battery storage, electric vehicle charging, plus an introduction to environmental technologies, and mental health awareness.

The qualifications are all aimed at upskilling existing and working electricians, and will be running throughout 2024.

Luke Foster, the college's environmental and sustainability sector specialist lecturer, said: "Green technology is creating so many employment opportunities. A lot of construction jobs now require knowledge about what green technologies can be installed, and how it can help to save energy within the home."

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Meats and treats for a feast to remember



It was a busy end of the year for the DukesHill team

Artisan ham producer DukesHill worked around the clock to meet the high demand for its gammon, ham and sweet treats such as mince pies and handmade Christmas cakes ahead of the festive period.

The Telford-based business, holder of a Royal Warrant, is known for its traditionally cured hams, free-range bronze turkeys, and fine foods, and to cope with demand, increased its workforce by 200%.

During the peak Christmas period between October and December, DukesHill cured over 15,000 outdoor bred pork legs including hams, bacon, slices of porchetta, ham hock and pork products.

Over forty thousand hams were sold during the festive season in 2022, a number the luxury food producer is hoping to exceed in 2023. They also expect to distribute two thousand of their specially reared turkeys, tens of thousands of handmade mince pies, and over seven thousand of DukesHill's very own handmade Christmas puddings, as people stock up for the big day.

“During the peak Christmas period between October and December, DukesHill cured over 15,000 outdoor bred pork legs including hams. . .”

Last year's statistics show the nation is opting for more gammon around Christmas time than ever before. Data collected by Kantar shows that retailers experienced a 23.6% increase in value of gammon sales and 5.1% uplift by volume year-on-year, of gammon products in the four weeks to Christmas Day 2022.

Mark Gallagher, chief executive of DukesHill, said: “The months running up to Christmas are the busiest time at DukesHill. Ham is one of the nation's favourite centrepieces over Christmas and it's no wonder – it's an incredibly versatile crowd-pleaser that is easy to prepare and absolutely delicious.”

One of DukesHill's farmers, Andrew Tomson from Peddars Pigs Ltd, played a crucial role in helping meet the demand.

He said: “As a pig farmer of 45 years, our commitment is to ensure the wellbeing of every pig under our care. I firmly believe that raising healthy pigs on straw is about providing them with a life of comfort and respect in an environment where they thrive. This produces the best quality pork and we know these animals have lived the best life possible.”

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Embracing financial opportunities: Navigating 2024's economic and regulatory changes

CARL STACEY, financial planner for Azets Wealth Management in Shrewsbury, shares his thoughts on what lies ahead for individuals and investors in 2024.

Economic Outlook

Entering 2024, the UK's financial landscape is characterised by cautious optimism amidst persistent challenges. Despite continuing economic uncertainty, the UK economy is projected to grow by 0.7% according to the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR).

Similarly, forecasts from J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs show a slightly optimistic view, indicating potential for growth in certain sectors. However, the Bank of England's outlook suggests economic stagnation, reflecting ongoing uncertainties. This varied economic landscape highlights the importance of strategic financial planning and the need for flexibility.

Pension Changes

Next year introduces a major reform in UK pension regulations with the abolishment of the lifetime allowance (LTA) from April 6th. This significant change removes the constraints of the previous LTA cap of £1,073,100, which imposed additional taxes on savings exceeding this threshold. The abolition of the LTA is a game-changer for high earners and those with substantial pension savings, as it removes the tax that curtailed the growth of larger pension pots.

Additionally, while the LTA is being removed, the tax-free cash limit remains fixed at £268,275 from April 6th, 2024. This figure, which represents 25% of the former LTA, will now be a static cap, affecting the amount that can be withdrawn tax-free upon retirement. The freezing of this limit means that individuals will need to plan their retirement withdrawals more strategically to maximise the tax benefits. This



Carl Stacey of Azets Wealth Management

is particularly pertinent for individuals who are close to or have already exceeded the previous LTA threshold, as they now have the opportunity to restructure their pension contributions and drawdowns to optimise their retirement income under the new regulations.

Capital Gains Tax Allowance: Preparing for Reduction

In April 2024, the UK will see a substantial reduction in the capital gains tax (CGT) allowance, decreasing it to £3,000. This dramatic decrease from the previous year's £6,000

allowance (already reduced from 2022/23's allowance of £12,300) significantly impacts the taxation of capital gains on asset sales. For individuals with significant investments in stocks, shares, or property, this change necessitates a strategic review of their assets to minimise potential tax liabilities.

This reduction in the CGT allowance will particularly affect those with diversified investment portfolios or property holdings. For example, if an investor were to sell a second property or a stock portfolio generating a capital gain of £20,000, only £3,000 of this gain would be exempt from CGT, with the remaining £17,000 being taxed. It's therefore crucial for investors to consider the timing and size of their asset disposals to optimise tax efficiency.

For those planning to sell assets or rebalance their investment portfolios, the impending reduction in the CGT allowance highlights the importance of acting before April 2024. By doing so, investors can potentially realise gains under the higher allowance limit, thereby reducing their overall tax burden.

We are here to help

In 2024, significant regulatory changes and economic variability make expert financial guidance more crucial than ever. At Azets Wealth Management, we can help you navigate any challenges, offering comprehensive and tailored financial advice. As part of Azets, we also have access to a network of advisors who can provide additional specialist guidance where necessary. Please get in touch via azetswealthmanagement.co.uk

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Award-winning building company Pave Aways is celebrating its 50th birthday. Managing director STEVEN OWEN explains some of the reasons for the company's ongoing success

Company has paved the way for half a century

Just about the oldest cliché you'll hear in business is that people are your greatest asset. And there's a very good reason for that – it just happens to be absolutely true.

I like to think that Pave Aways is continuing proof that the more you invest in your people, your supply chain and your communities, the more successful you become.

We're incredibly proud to be celebrating our 50th anniversary over the next 12 months. Having first been incorporated on October 1, 1973, we've come a long way in the past five decades.

From those early days as a groundworks contractor based at Park Hall on the edge of Oswestry, to becoming one of the region's most successful privately-owned construction firms, we've never lost sight of our core values and the importance of serving our people and communities.

Those values start with an unwavering commitment to quality. Our reputation is built on delivering construction projects to the highest standards. It doesn't matter how much you talk a great game – if you don't deliver on time, on budget and meet the customer's expectations, you stand little chance of success.

I'd like to think our track record in this regard speaks for itself.

Drive around Shropshire and Mid Wales for any length of time and you're likely to see some of our work – whether it be one of our school projects, our work with the NHS such as the Headley Court Veterans' Orthopaedic Centre at Gobowen, community buildings such as the award-winning Hafan Yr Afon at Newtown, or any one of the countless private sector projects we've been involved with.

We've been fortunate to win a number of awards – from scooping the title of Shropshire Company of the Year in 2019 to being named SME of the Year at the Constructing Excellence Midlands awards only a few months ago. But whilst the plaudits are always nice, I think we all get a bigger thrill out of seeing our buildings serving their communities day in, day out.

Building the highest-quality spaces for vital social and community infrastructure is just one of the ways we live out our commitment to building better communities for all of us.

Another is our belief in helping create and support strong, resilient, and local supply chains. By employing local sub-contractors, suppliers and craftspeople, we do much more than just give employment.

These supply chains create wealth which goes back into the local economy. They create opportunities to give our youngsters a bright, confident future, and they create a real sense of pride that we are able to achieve all of this together.

One element of this, of course, is our wish to recruit and employ local people wherever we can. We now have some 80 employees on our books and the very great majority are from Shropshire and Mid Wales. This is really important to us.

Not only does it mean we are investing in our local communities, it means our staff are equally invested in them.

There is no doubt that a local workforce, brought up and deeply-rooted in the area, is more likely to be committed to their own success, the success of the company and the success of their region in turn. It's one of the reasons why our staff do so much to support local charities and good causes. This year we are raising money for West Mercia Search & Rescue, as well as sponsoring a variety of charity events, community groups and sports clubs.



A golden anniversary for the Pave Aways team



Celebrating victory at the Shropshire Chamber awards

Our commitment to our region is also a driving force behind our support of local apprenticeships. More than 15% of our current workforce are apprentices or trainees at varying stages of training, and we look to take on three new apprentices every year.

Alongside this, we continue to invest in our staff's professional development and health and wellbeing.

Take mental health as an example. It's a sobering fact that every working day, two construction workers take their own life and that 48% of people working in construction have taken time off due to stress.

The sector is more likely to have people facing mental health challenges than almost any other.

That's why raising awareness about mental health and putting a focus on employee wellbeing is so important to us.

Our people are our business. That makes their health and wellbeing our business too. So we have stringent and well-documented health and safety procedures in place and a full-time health and safety officer to ensure the health of our team.



The Pave Aways site – and its vehicles – have seen many changes over time

We offer regular one-to-ones, mentoring and access to a free and confidential counselling service, and have an open-door policy for anyone who wants to talk. It's all part of a culture of support for our team, regardless of whether it is a work or personal matter, and sits alongside a health and wellbeing officer role to further enhance the support we provide.

We are committed to providing mental health first aid training for all staff to encourage more understanding and have a range of other initiatives – from breakfast baps on Blue Monday, to in-house yoga sessions to support our team.

If that shows our commitment to our team, events such as our annual Build a Planter Day are tangible proof of our commitment to the community. Villagers are taught some basic carpentry skills and techniques, and then under the guidance of our team, set to work on constructing the planters.

The workshop helps to bring the community together to learn new skills and through the planters adds something of lasting value and benefit to the community.

It is just one aspect of our Community Support Scheme, through which we provide sponsorship and refurbishment opportunities that rejuvenate community spaces, schools, and public buildings. Our aim is to create environments that inspire and enrich the lives of all who interact with them.

It was a real honour to win the Community Champion award at the last Shropshire Chamber Business Awards in recognition of this work and our belief in being a driving force for positive change. But there's little point supporting our communities if we don't protect our environment.

That's why we are doing everything we can to reduce our carbon footprint and work in as sustainable a way as possible. By collectively working towards reducing our ecological footprint, we contribute to preserving the environment for future generations.

It's fair to say that much has changed at Pave Aways over the last 50 years.

From its early beginnings, founded and led by Cliff Evans, the firm started to win building maintenance contracts at military sites and other establishments, and building construction became a far bigger part of the business.

In 2011, I led a management buyout to build on the work of Peter Jackson and Roy Evans, which provided a renewed vigour for growth.

Victoria Lawson and Jamie Evans – who had both been with Pave Aways for more than ten years – became directors in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and were joined by Charlotte Davies in 2022.

Throughout these changes, Pave Aways has retained its core values.

While today's Pave Aways projects are more likely to be multi-million pound school buildings with the latest eco-friendly and sustainable technologies, our passion for excellence and giving back to the community has never changed.

I am certain it will remain the case for the next 50 years.



Pave Aways was delighted to announce that Jon Goss achieved his Level 2 apprenticeship in Carpentry and Joinery (site carpentry) with Distinction. The success marks a real milestone for Jon, who is a terrific example of how you can continue learning and developing at any age.

10

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Cultures and practices change, but people are still at the core



Ruth Ross

As the leading business support organisation for Shropshire, we often get asked what we think the next year is going to look like.

The reality is that this question has become tricky to answer given the recent years of political and economic uncertainty that businesses have faced. From Brexit and a global pandemic to a cost-of-living crisis, it's been a turbulent time for all of us in business. We know that battle lines are being drawn as politicians gear up for a General Election this year, and we're ready to put the business-critical asks to Government through our engagement with politicians. What we're calling for politicians and

Whitehall to focus on is growth; not just economic growth but also growth through people. People are the greatest resource to any business and we've seen more and more organisations make changes to their cultures and ethos to align with the needs and core values of their employees. With firms struggling to recruit, creating those work cultures where employees feel valued, heard and appreciated is going to be key to ensuring business success. While understanding the power of your people is essential, we also know that the power of AI is only going to increase. No one can deny that the AI industry has dominated 2023, fundamentally changing the way we engage with forms of media be that art, music or digital. 2023 has been the sort of 'Wild West frontier' for AI and the real question is: will this frontier begin to be tamed in 2024? The short answer is yes. 2024 is going to see some enormous breakthroughs in AI, and we predict a shift towards more strategic implementation of AI programmes into business with AI becoming incorporated into daily business practices and processes. Business leaders need to think carefully about AI and how it can be deployed, balancing their innovation needs alongside their employee concerns. You're unlikely to lose your job to an AI programme but you might lose it to someone who knows how to

use AI better than you. Thinking about 2024, you can't help but think about how quickly time is going. It's been nearly three decades since the first UN Climate Change Conference and with the COP28 agreement signed in December, you can't help but wonder, are we really at the "beginning of the end" of the fossil fuel era? Businesses know their impact but struggle to make headway on reaching Net Zero. When it comes to the climate, we need business to be thinking about those long-term investments now to be ready for political and economic changes coming down the pipeline. In 2024 we are going to be speaking out louder on behalf of the Shropshire business community. We are launching our new Manifesto for Growth containing our key asks to Government and how we can work together to drive economic growth, tackling those long-standing challenges that businesses face. This year the Chamber is also going to be delivering some exciting new and innovative projects to support businesses across the county. From our Active Leadership training programme to new member benefits, there's never been a more exciting time to be a member. We're really excited to bring these new initiatives to the Shropshire business community, and encourage every business across the county to get involved with the Chamber.

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

Machinery R&D leads to £113,000 tax relief

Wrekin Sheet Metal has received more than £113,000 in research and development tax relief from the Government for advances to its machinery. The Telford-based business worked with Ryan, a global tax services and software provider, on its most recent tax relief claim. At any one time, Wrekin could be working on 450 to 500 different components from 10 different industries. Making advancements to its machinery that go far beyond what is already available in the industry enables Wrekin to mass-produce non-standard products for the automotive, aircraft, and security industries, among many others. Historically, manufacturers had machine shops to produce the components and parts they need to build the products they sell. Many companies have now changed the way they operate, and outsourcing to businesses like Wrekin has become much more common. Wrekin's expansive range of technical equipment can often bend, shape, and press the components as a standard process, but sometimes a research and development project

is required as the ability to achieve certain shaped parts is not available in the industry. Some of Wrekin's most recent R&D activity involved producing components for commercial refrigerators – developing new advanced methods of sheet-metal folding, pressing, and cutting, and designing machine adaptations for both testing prototypes and delivering the finished product. Simon Orpe, sales director at Wrekin Sheet Metal, said: "We are always trying to stay ahead of the game, and R&D is an important part of that. The team at Ryan were professional and easy to work with, and the money is being invested straight back into the business. "We have made significant investments including £2 million in new machinery. We are also investing in the development of our team members. There is a skill shortage in the industry, so it's critical we ensure the foundations are strong so we can continue to grow." Ryan's Kully Nijjar said: "Wrekin is committed to finding new ways to innovate, which helps them grow but also produces great results for their customers. The tax relief they have received will play an important role in helping them develop more R&D projects."

New Zealand House is new home as firm expands again



ORJ Law has completed a new lease at New Zealand House in Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, which means the office space – which is owned and managed by Morris Property – is fully-let. The law firm now has offices in Shrewsbury, Telford, Stafford, and Birmingham. Terry Jones, head of agriculture, said: "Shrewsbury offers exciting opportunities for our company, and we are thrilled to have found our new home." Pictured, from left, are Neil Anderson, Terry Jones, Sarah Evans and Toby Shaw.



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If you're eyeing career advancement, these courses can be the catalyst for change

Do more in 2024

As we look forward to the year ahead, many of us might well be reflecting on our goals and aspirations and contemplating how we can make the most of the coming months.

If you're thinking of ways to enhance your skills, explore new passions, or advance your career, look no further than Shrewsbury Colleges Group's part-time, online distance learning, and Higher Education courses and 'Do More in 2024'.

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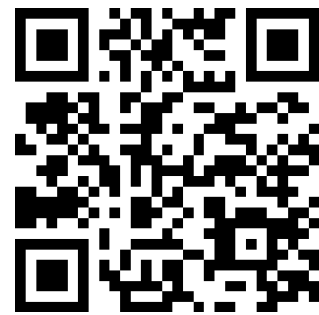
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Partnership with historic estate

A Shropshire-based accountancy firm has signed a corporate partnership with a 'jewel' of the local landscape.

WR Partners has become the official accountancy partner of Bolesworth, the historic estate just off the A41 between Whitchurch and Chester.

A series of focused business events this year will give WR Partners the chance to connect with local businesses, including Bolesworth's business tenants.

WR Partners says the aim is to build a strategic relationship with the estate that promises 'enhanced financial support and expertise'.

Bolesworth runs a wide range of events and attractions, including world class equestrian competitions, live music, and live motorsport events.

The estate also acts as an exclusive venue for corporate activations and private events, as well as large public events and family-focused festivals.

"We are thrilled to deepen our relationship with Bolesworth Estate and take on the role of the official Accountancy Partner associated with the Estate and Bolesworth Events," said WR Partners managing partner Helen Spencer.

"Bolesworth Estate is not only a jewel in the Cheshire landscape but also a vital contributor



WR Partners will be involved in a number of business-focused events at Bolesworth this year

to the local community and the broader region. We look forward to working closely with Bolesworth Estate's team to help strengthen their financial offering and ensure long-term sustainability."

Nina Barbour, managing director and owner of Bolesworth, said: "We are delighted to be working with the team from WR Partners and are happy that they have joined us as our official accountancy partner - associated with

the estate and the events that we run here at Bolesworth.

"Bolesworth Estate has a legacy of excellence, and we believe that WR Partners, with their proven track record and commitment to our shared community, is the ideal partner to support our financial needs. We are excited about the possibilities this collaboration presents and the positive impact it will have on the local economy."

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| SIMILAR PROPERTIES REQUIRED TO LET RENT UPON APPLICATION <ul style="list-style-type: none">Prominent mixed use development with roadside location, subject to planningIn excess of 45,000 vehicles passing daily (2017 - dft.gov.uk)100+ car parking spaces (2,000+ within 5 minute walk)Suitable for a variety of commercial usesAvailable for 4th quarter of 2024Accommodation from 1,413 sq ft to 10,958 sq ftAdjacent to Bannatyne Health Club and Meole Brace Retail Park & Golf Club | SIMILAR PROPERTIES REQUIRED FOR SALE OFFERS INVITED <ul style="list-style-type: none">Total Gross Site Area of approximately 7.50 acres (3.03 hectares)Allocated commercial land currently subject to planning application awaiting determination to provide a Net Site Area of approximately 5.4 acres (2.185 hectares)Prominently located fronting onto Battlefield Road in sought-after commercial quarter of ShrewsburySuitable for a variety of commercial uses (subject to any statutory consents)Further details re planning available | SIMILAR PROPERTIES REQUIRED FOR SALE OFFERS INVITED £690,000 (EXCLUSIVE) <ul style="list-style-type: none">Substantial 17th century mid-terraced propertyProminently located fronting onto Willow Street in market town of OswestryExtensive accommodation with Total Site Area of 6,337.2 sq ft (588.7 sq m)8 individually decorated en-suite letting roomsSpacious, well-presented 4 bedrooomed owner apartmentGrade II Listed and in conservation areaAttractive courtyard area |

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One important point...

Anton Gunter



Howzit and a very happy new year . . . it's farewell to 2023, including the good and the bad.

We continued with the theme of worldwide conflict and dispute including Russia still invading Ukraine, closely followed by Israel trying its best to flatten Gaza, and the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

In the UK, we have had the bus and train drivers causing disruption over pay. Then in an ongoing pay and working conditions action, we have had nurses, junior doctors, and specialists all on strike too. Oh, and let us not forget the ambulance staff hitting the burning barrel during 2023 on several occasions too.

On it goes. In October we had the Bar Council of Northern Ireland taking to the picket line due to delays in receiving Legal Aid payments.

At Heathrow, we had disruption due to security staff staging ongoing strikes which

meant delays for freight moving through the airport. Not to be outdone, Gatwick had its own issues too, with staff striking for eight days.

Then it was the turn of teachers to drop all that they were doing and head on down to the old picket line. And lest we forget those that worked in the Passport Office that took its turn to have a five-week strike due to pay and working conditions.

And if all of that was not enough, we had Amazon employees staging a walk out. Yes, that is right, the world's richest man apparently does not pay his staff enough.

And in a strange choice, the Welsh rugby team threatened to go on strike due to pay and the terms under which they play. Some may say that although they did not eventually go on strike, it appeared to those that watch Welsh rugby, that results showed they did not turn up anyway.

But 2023 was also the year of close margin. In fact, close margin will probably be remembered more than the highest rate of inflation in the UK. Close margin is also responsible for Brexit and all the joys that come with it.

But it would be wrong for me not to mention the incredible close margins a certain rugby team achieved during October. Yes, that is right, just one point. For those rolling their eyes, that is all it takes to win. Boring, mundane, the same old same old etc . . . but it took just one point to make 69 million locals

ecstatic and joyful. It took just one point for the mighty Boks to make history and win their fourth rugby World Cup. It took just one point every week over a three-week period to end the hopes and dreams of a joint total of 139 million people.

The 'one point' that I am trying to make here is that 2023 may have seemed like a never-ending dispute; a tough year with the cost of living going up, with businesses struggling and even worse, shipping lines and supply chain misery due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East being disrupted. But as of January 2024, we all start over.

And we begin the year with trepidation; a nervousness, some excitement but the potential to make positive changes and positive choices.

Just as one point made a difference to 69 million South Africans, imagine what would happen if each person in the UK made one other person smile; if your Shropshire business made one extra person happy.

If we all did just one thing to make an impact on someone else's life or business, what an awesome amount of positivity we would generate.

It only takes 1% more happiness to generate a lot. 2024 may have a tough outlook, but just like my favourite rugby team, together we can achieve a lot – even if it's just by a single point.

PS. A man walks into a bar and says . . . ouch! Oh go on, admit that it made you smile!

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

Clear voice in shaping the future of business

The Marches Local Enterprise Partnership is working with local authorities and partners to ensure a smooth transition of its responsibilities over the coming months.

In its annual report, chief executive Rachel Laver highlighted the impact the LEP had made over the past year, including:

- Supporting 8,555 businesses through the Marches Growth Hub
- Creating or safeguarding 389 jobs
- Generating £25.3 million of match funding
- Launching a £4 million Marches Energy Fund
- Reaching more than 4,410 students and 113 teachers through the Marches Careers Hub's innovative Start in the Marches local labour market platform

Rachel said: "Our Key Account Management programme also saw a combined £13 million invested by six separate foreign-owned companies during this year – creating 74 new jobs and safeguarding 150 others. It helped

contribute to 468 new jobs being created by 20 foreign-owned firms in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin last year too.

"Thirty companies have benefitted from £339,000 of funding through our Marches Energy Grant – a £1.5million fund which helps them cut their energy bills and emissions.

"And we brought together transport experts to help drive some of the infrastructure improvements needed to develop a prosperous and sustainable future.

"We're also working to develop alternative land uses which respect the environment and bring new opportunities to the way we manage our land."

In the report, Marches LEP chair Sonia Roberts says that while the organisation strongly disagrees with the Government's decision to transfer responsibilities away from LEPs, the partnership has a record that speaks for itself.

"We have given the business community a clear voice in shaping the future and developed first-class working partnerships between businesses, local authorities and education and skills providers.

"Our work has seen us invest more than £196million with more than 18,000 jobs created or in the pipeline as a result."

Dedicated to honouring the armed services



Shrewsbury-based custom software company Shoothill, and its subsidiary Housebuilder Pro, have signed the Armed Forces Covenant.

The Covenant demonstrates a dedication to recognising and honouring the sacrifices made by the men and women who serve in the armed forces.

Shoothill managing director Rod Plummer, who served in the Royal Navy, said: "We believe in the importance of recognising and honouring the sacrifices made by our armed forces personnel."

"My experience in the Royal Navy firmly turned me into who I am – we work at Shoothill to make sure these core values are upheld by every employee."



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Andy has made the shortlist

Shropshire Council's chief executive Andy Begley has been shortlisted for a prestigious leadership award. He is one of three leaders nominated in the Public and Third Sector Leader category at the West Midlands Leadership Awards 2024.

The awards celebrate the people who are role models in their organisation, as well as showcasing the achievements and success of business in the region. Winners will be announced in March.

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

One of his key initiatives has been galvanising the whole organisation behind a clear vision and plan – The Shropshire Plan – and the difference every person can make.

The authority says: "This is resulting in clear signs of change across the council, kickstarting a new culture and approach that has not been possible before."

"Andy has also driven a new approach to delivering major projects, and is the key driver towards Shropshire Council being recognised as a confident, capable and caring council."

"Alongside the savings, new developments and the major projects, Andy has also been driving an evidence-led, data-driven, community-focused approach to delivering services."



Andy Begley, Shropshire Council's chief executive

County tourism boosts coffers by £767 million

Tourism boosted the Shropshire economy by more than £767 million in 2022, new figures have revealed.

A report released by official tourism organisation Visit Shropshire shows the full extent of benefits brought to the county during the course of the year.

Of the 10,040,000 people who visited, there were 1,410,000 overnight stays and 8,630,000 day trips. In addition, a total of 8,474 people are now employed in the county's tourism sector.

Mark Hooper, project lead of Visit Shropshire, said: "These latest figures highlight the huge contribution that tourism and hospitality businesses make to the Shropshire economy."

"There has been a 6.4% increase in overnight stays when compared to 2019 – this shows Shropshire is becoming seen as a longer stay destination when compared to historic figures which suggest the county has been better known as a day visit location."

"While the report's figures for 2022 are positive, we will never be complacent and continue to work with our partners to promote the county as a great place to visit."

Data from Visit Shropshire's transport partners at Transport for Wales and West



Ludlow Castle is one of Shropshire's many tourism hotspots

Midlands Railway show that rail travel to the county has seen a significant increase in the last 12 months, with the Birmingham to Shrewsbury line enjoying year-on-year growth of 17.5%.

Mark added: "With new developments such as Smithfield Riverside in Shrewsbury, and linking Oswestry to the national rail network,

we are excited about what the future holds for the county, with tourism continuing to be a major contributor to our economy."

"Shropshire is such a unique place, drawing people from all over the world, with its unparalleled charm. We look forward to seeing visitor numbers continue to rise, as the county's reputation as a must-visit location grows."

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Managing charity investments

The emergence of AI remains a much-sparked debate; we can be sure that digital innovation will continue in 2024. The growing technological revolution and dominance of algorithms has led to much higher expectations from consumers in terms of accessibility to instant communication and information.

As this continues to advance, there is a demand for those seeking human skills and meaningful relationships to help guide them through periods of uncertainty.

2023 has proven a challenging year for investors. Record inflation and rising interest rates have caused considerable disruption to UK clients – faced with increased cost of living, rising mortgage rates, and reduced disposable income. Wealth Managers have continued to guide investors through the disruption, remaining focused on achieving their long-term goals.

Supporting our charity clients

At EFG Harris Allday we manage assets on behalf of individuals, families, pensions, charities, and trusts. This Autumn, we were delighted to welcome Rupert Cecil as our new Head of Charities and Philanthropy, supporting our current clients and establishing new relationships with charities across the UK.

Running a charitable organisation requires a serious level of funding. Public donations provide vital revenue to support humanitarian work, but these contributions are rarely enough to cover a charity's operational costs. Trustees are the volunteers who decide how the charity is run. Undertaking investment decisions can require a great level of responsibility and expertise.

Many charities choose to invest with us to grow their funds, or to provide a regular income to cover the operational costs of running the charity. This can help to ensure longevity and provide opportunity to support larger philanthropic projects.

We work with a range of charitable organisations, from sectors such as arts and culture, history preservation and sport. Our experienced investment managers will work with the charity's trustees to create a bespoke investment strategy in line with the charity's ethos and long-term investment objectives.

With over thirty years of investment experience, and ongoing personal experience as a trustee of the Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation, Rupert provides a much-needed level of support between the Harris Allday investment team and charity trustees seeking educational training and ongoing guidance.

"Harris Allday manages money on behalf of several charities across the UK. I am delighted to introduce Rupert to the wider team, and I am confident his experience will enhance our charity client's knowledge and confidence when it comes to investing." – Richard Killingbeck, Managing Director

Harris Allday is delighted to be collaborating with key charitable partnerships in 2024. We have several exciting announcements over the coming weeks, supporting national programmes which invest back into the community.

Further information will be announced on our website and LinkedIn page.

If you are a trustee of a charity or charitable trust looking to grow your assets and support future projects, please contact our Shrewsbury office. A member of the team will be available to discuss your requirements.



Richard Killingbeck

“ Our experienced investment managers will work with the charity's trustees to create a bespoke investment strategy in line with the charity's ethos and long-term investment objectives.”

Ground Floor, Beech House, Anchorage Avenue, Shrewsbury Business Park, Shrewsbury, SY2 6FG

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Market Reflection and 2024 Outlook

Throughout the year, investor attention has remained focused on inflation data and signals from central banks, although several other emerging themes have also contributed to market returns. Key trends have ranged from renewed excitement over the prospects of artificial intelligence (AI), a quiet revolution with Japan's corporate governance reforms, and structural issues in the world's second largest economy, China.

In the final quarter of the year we have seen a shift of investor interest rate expectations from 'higher for longer' to ease monetary policy. Investors should be cautious of complacency with several risks remaining.

Leadership of global equity returns has been unusually narrow over the year. The predominance of global equity index performance has come from the "Magnificent 7" tech and tech-related stocks in the S&P 500 Index (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, NVIDIA, and Tesla). On average, these companies have seen their share prices increase by 75% in 2023, while the other 493 companies in the S&P 500 have risen only 12%. Strong

performance has partly been due to a rebound from falls seen in 2022 following initial interest rate hikes, however the potential of AI has also captured the imaginations of investors and helped to fuel the rally. Although we agree that we are in the earlier stages of the next paradigm shift in AI which will undoubtedly change our lives and disrupt entire industries, we also believe it is crucial for investors to balance this potential with valuations, being particularly wary of chasing performance at times where shorter-term exuberance is likely to be inflating prices.



Jack Peglar

We continue to believe that truly actively managed, diversified portfolios will prevail and continue to deliver superior risk-adjusted returns in the long run. For investors entering the year with a balanced approach, the opportunities look positive recent history. Higher quality bonds are delivering attractive yields and provide a buffer against the risk of an economic slowdown.

Previously unloved areas of the global equity market, including Europe and Japan, have begun to see a change in fortunes and continue to offer more sensible valuations. In contrast to the dominance of growth factor returns in recent years, we see the income component of equity returns as likely to be a larger proportion of total returns over the next period.

As long-term supporters of investment trusts, we continue to see attractive opportunities following the dissatisfaction seen over the past 18 months. While changing market conditions have certainly caused some investment trust business models to be called into question, we have seen many examples where high-quality propositions are potentially trading too cheaply. With a recent increase in corporate activity, including several mergers, acquisitions and initiations of strategic reviews, opportunities for investment companies are becoming clearer.

We approach 2024 with a cautious mindset but are prepared to be nimble as opportunities present themselves.

The value of your investment can fall as well as rise in value, and the income derived from it may fluctuate. You might get back less than you invest. Currency exchange rate fluctuations can also have a positive and negative affect on your investments. Please note that EFG Harris Allday does not provide tax advice. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future performance.

EFG Harris Allday



Katie Foster, left, and Kim Gilmour celebrate the fundraising total



Karen Sawbridge, Sally Themans, Dean Harris, Kate Ware and Sarah Cowell

Posh frocks raise funds

A group of Shropshire businesswomen raised over £3,000 for charity at the annual 'Posh Frocks' Ladies Dinner.

More than 80 ladies gathered at Hadley Park House Hotel in Telford to raise funds for the Alzheimer's Research UK Shropshire Fundraising Group.

Kim Gilmour of Connect Consultancy, who organises the annual event, said: "We all had a fantastic evening of fun, food and fundraising."

"A special thanks goes to local fundraiser Katie Foster who inspired me to support the charity this year, and to Paul Rushworth, well-known Shropshire magician and comedian, who entertained us during the evening as part of his ongoing support for ARUK."

"Thanks also to everyone who donated hamper gifts, attended the event and spent generously on the night and for the additional donations from Sarah Lowe via her employer and one of Katie's business connections."



Maisy Owen pictured with Kim Kelly and Lena Jarl Churm



Katie Foster explained the work of the fundraising group



Jeevan Punj, Rosalie Arran, Jana Ward and Carole Aveson



Kim Gilmour of Connect Consultancy, the event organiser



Magician Paul Rushworth



Emily and Cheryl Marren



Tony Hobbs from Tranquil Still Distillery



Betley Park is owned by Jo Fallows and Guy Robinson

Latest headlines from all four corners of the county

● Midlands Air Ambulance Charity has achieved gold Investors in People accreditation. The lifesaving pre-hospital emergency service is now part of the elite 17 per cent of the 50,000 organisations that Investors in People assess to achieve the gold standard. Chief executive Hanna Sebright said: "We are exceptionally proud. This is testament to everyone's commitment to our organisation, our management practices and our dedication to continuous improvement."

● Market Drayton-based Tranquil Still Distillery produced a special gin to raise money for Hope House Children's Hospice over the festive season. The Clementine and Hibiscus Gin was created by Tony Hobbs from his award-winning distillery, with at least £10 from every bottle sold being donated to support seriously ill local children.

● Property developers Barratt and David Wilson Homes have donated £600 to Oxon Parish Church in Shrewsbury to support the efforts to resurface the car park and pathways. Oxon Parish Church was built in 1854, with the church hall having previously been the village primary school before its relocation. Now the hall is used by many community groups.

● Telford & Wrekin Council has bought Wellington Market, the historic 12th-century indoor site, thanks to funding from the Central

Government's Capital Regeneration Programme fund. Recent assistance from the authority's Pride in Our High Street programme has already breathed new life into the market, creating an outdoor pop-up market, an entertainment area, and an internal food court.

● Betley Park, near Shrewsbury, was voted 'Certificated Location of the Year Best Newcomer' for 2023 from the Caravan and Motorhome Club. The site near Lyth Hill is owned by the dedicated duo of Guy Robinson and Jo Fallows, and secured the award thanks to public votes from those who have camped there. Jo said: "We couldn't be more proud of this award. We have exceeded our attendance forecasts and received consistently amazing reviews from customers which we are truly grateful for."

● Law firm Lanyon Bowdler has maintained its excellent rankings in a prestigious national guide, with 13 lawyers highlighted as recommended practitioners. The company has nine practice areas recommended in the 2024 Chambers UK legal guide, six of which are ranked in the top two bands. The Chambers UK guide ranks law firms based on independent research and interviews with clients, and has been helping people find the best lawyers and firms in the country for more than 30 years.

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Amendment to Act helps to protect the workforce



The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 has received Royal assent and is anticipated to come into force in October this year. It imposes a proactive duty on employers to take “reasonable steps” to prevent sexual harassment of employees.

Jennifer Gibson is a senior associate solicitor at Aaron & Partners in Shrewsbury, who advises employers on a range of day-to-day human resources issues

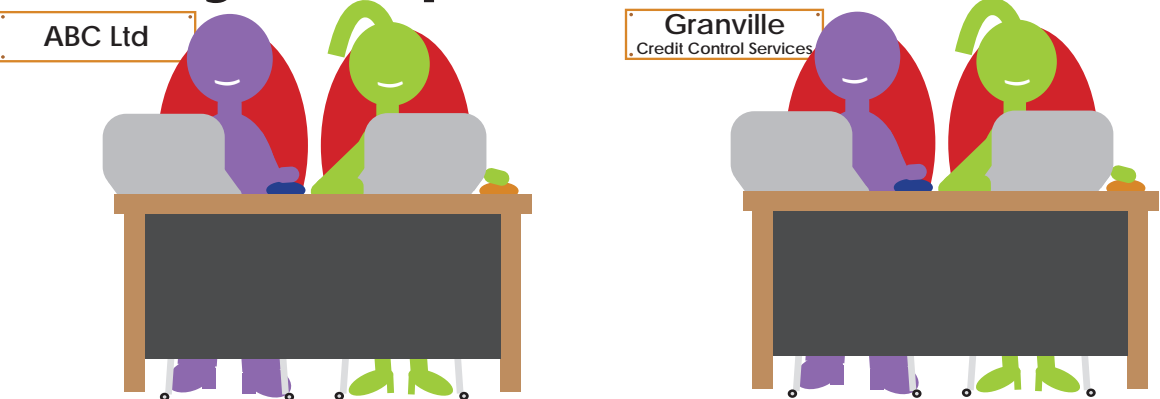
Whilst this is an important step in the right direction to protect employees against sexual harassment, this responsibility is not as onerous on employers as initially intended. The first draft of the Act proposed that employers take “all reasonable steps” to prevent sexual harassment and, in addition, re-introduced the duty to protect employees against harassment from third parties. The House of Lords removed this detail when they amended the Act, and the House of Commons accepted the decision. Parliament has subsequently been criticised for weakening the obligations under the Act.

What does this mean for Shropshire businesses? Employers should prepare themselves for the changes that are anticipated under the Act, to protect their employees and to mitigate any claims that could be brought against them. Examples of reasonable steps employers could take to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace include:

- adopting clear internal policies that deal with anti-harassment and equality, or reviewing existing policies to make sure they are still relevant
- providing staff training so they are aware of what sexual harassment is and the policies in place to avoid it
- making it clear to employees that sexual harassment will not be tolerated
- having clear procedures in place so that staff are aware how to report incidents and how they will be dealt with
- if incidents of sexual harassment are reported, taking them seriously and dealing with them promptly and appropriately

Employers should be aware that under the new Act, if a successful claim is brought against them for failing to prevent sexual harassment, the Act allows an employment tribunal to increase compensation awarded to the claimant by up to 25%.

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From dream to reality: Charting your business course

It starts with dreams of building a business – a thriving bakery perhaps, a tech solution or a graphic design service.

How do you bridge the gap between these visions and reality? The answer lies in creating a plan with purposeful goals, milestones, and the constant in all that you do . . . your "Why".

Your Plan

Without a clear plan to your business goal, you can easily end up back where you started or desperately clinging on by your fingertips. That's not to say that a clear plan will always make for an easy ride, but it will allow you to navigate obstacles when they occur (we can't plan for all eventualities). Be mindful that you, the owner, are most essential person in the business, in order that you ensure your sustainability, is like securing an oxygen mask first, during an airplane crisis in order to help others.

Success Planning Process

In your new business you have to wear all the 'hats' – marketing, sales, operations, finance, HR, management and training. Think of this as: Create demand, Produce, Administrate, and Build a Team, resulting in earnings for you and/or invested back into the business. Plan-Do-Review (what went well and what didn't) for everything you do, repeating good practice and pruning out what didn't work.

Strategy or Tactics, what's the most important?

- Strategy is about what do you want to achieve, and effectiveness
- Tactics are about how are you going to achieve the strategy – and efficiencies (do one thing 1,000 times, not a 1,000 things once)

Both are as important as each other. By not establishing a clear achievable strategy (a plan) with the right efficient tactics, your business will fail (either slowly or quickly) or 'just survive'. Both strong strategy and tactics will ensure you thrive
Think of you Strategy as:
● Who are your customers
● What will you do for them
Without customers your business is a hobby!



Eddie Allan, head of programme delivery at Good2Great

Establish milestones

You may have long term goal...but do you know what will happen on Monday? We need to establish short and medium-term milestones. Define your milestones over the first 3-6months by establishing the following for each milestone.

- Income – How much would success feel like?
- People - Who do you want involved?
- Investment - What do you need to invest?

People don't buy what you do... they buy why you do it! All businesses know what they do, some know how they do it, but very few articulate why they do it (or know). Successful ones do know. They talk about why they do it, and what they believe!
Establish your 'Why' and let your customers know. Do business with customers that believe what you believe.
Next time we will look at how to establish who your customers are, what you will do for them, and understanding the market.

● **Eddie Allan is head of programme delivery at Bridgnorth business consultants Good2Great. Run by Good2Great, the Shropshire Start Up programme is funded by £286,923 from Shropshire Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation, as part of the Levelling Up agenda, and will assist start-ups over the next 15 months. If this has sparked your interest in setting up a business contact Tamsin on tamsin@good-2-great.co.uk**

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Building a Future NEIL LAUNDON



Neil Laundon and Good2Great advisor Michelle Jehu with the tools attained with the help of a Start kickstarter grant

Neil, of Halfway House, was a schoolteacher with a yearning to have his own business, and when he moved to Shropshire he decided to make that dream a reality by developing his business as a builder. "From a teenager, I supported my father on a part-time basis with his property services in Northamptonshire, where I have picked up all the skills I am now using. Moving to Shropshire I thought was a perfect time to branch out on my own," he said. Neil became the initial graduate of the Shropshire Start-up programme delivered by Good2Great designed to assist Start-up businesses. He gained skills, knowledge and a grant which allowed him to change that dream to reality. A series of online workshops and one-to-one advisor support got him where he needed to be to establish his new venture.
Call Neil: 07772 557289

It started as a hobby NINA FINCH



Nina Finch attended Good2Great's online workshops and received individual support from her advisor

Nina, who is based near Ludlow, has spent over 23 years in the public and private sector but her passion for pottery has created opportunities that will transform her hobby into a business. "I have been bitten by the pottery bug," she said. "I spent most of lockdown teaching myself throwing and other ceramic techniques. "After a few months this felt like to right direction for me to head in, so while the transition has been gradual it now feels like the right time to make it more than just a hobby." Nina attended Good2Great's online workshops and received individual support from her advisor (all of whom have ran or run their own businesses). She's now applying for a Kickstarter grant to purchase items for her business, Running Wild Pottery "My customers are looking for the 'special' and 'unique'. Something you won't find in a main chain store and is truly one of a kind."
Call Nina: 07595 986386

Engineer to Entrepreneur TOBY DORRELL



Toby Forrell bought Claywood with the vision to enable others to enjoy the outdoors

Toby and his wife Ruth are behind the 'Claywood' development, a 15-acre site in Billingsley, near Bridgnorth. Former engineer Toby completed the Shropshire Start Up programme delivered by Good2Great aimed at helping start-up companies in the county. "Everything from the weekly sessions to the one-to-one mentoring have been brilliantly executed," he said. Toby and Ruth were both born and raised in Shropshire and returned after working away for over 15 years in 2021. "We bought Claywood with the vision to enable others to come, appreciate, and enjoy their own little slice of the great outdoors, whilst staying in our luxury accommodation," Toby said. "Good2Great has been an invaluable resource to ensure every area of starting my new business is covered. Guests will be able to step outside and enjoy their own piece of nature."
Call Toby: 07595 440581

From employee to owner MICHELLE PULLEN-LOCKLEY



Michelle Pullen-Lockley always wanted to produce and sell her own designs and see someone wearing one of her pieces

"I've been in the jewellery industry for over 30 years but have always worked on other people's jewellery," said Michelle, from Much Wenlock. "I've always wanted to produce and sell my own designs and would love to see someone wearing one of my pieces, so I decided to finally take the plunge and start my business, DuBelle Jewellery Ltd. I now design and produce luxury stone set and plain silver jewellery. "The endless support that I have received from Good2Great's team has been outstanding. Without them I really don't think that I would be ready to launch my business. 'They guide and encourage you through every step of the journey, helping you to focus on all areas. I would highly recommend any new business to go through the start-up course as it helps you to understand every aspect of starting up a business."
Call Michelle: 07902 225066

Develop ideas at workshop that'll boost business

Two expert Shropshire workshops will give inspirational insights on how companies can develop new ideas and grow their business.

Stuart Hartley – who has supported more than 600 businesses to innovate and grow over more than two decades – will deliver the workshops in Shrewsbury on January 31.

The events are being staged by the Marches Growth Hub Shropshire and businesses can sign up to one or both.

The first three-hour workshop – From Garage to Glory – starts at 9.30am and will help any business which wants to develop new products or services that will attract new customers and increase sales.

Topics covered during the session include identifying market opportunities, generating new product and service ideas, evaluating and selecting ideas,

developing prototypes and testing products and launching new products and services.

The second session – Innovate Your Business Model & Stay Ahead of the Competition – starts at 1pm and will also run for three hours.

It will explain the idea of business model innovation, why it is important for small businesses, how to identify opportunities for business model innovation, and how to develop and implement a new business model.

Both workshops are ideal for small business owners, entrepreneurs, and anyone who wants to learn how to innovate their business model or grow their business.

Stuart Hartley has been a management consultant at one of the leading boutique consultancy organisations and spent seven years working in enterprise and innovation at De Montfort University.

Lettings on the rise



From left, Harry Brueton, Kennedy Barrett, Hannah Jones, Hayley Cresswell, Olivia Harrison, Sophie Guest and managing director Andy Roberts (front)

Berriman Eaton has reported a 30% rise in its dedicated lettings business since 2020, with more than 420 properties now managed across Bridgnorth, Wolverhampton and Wombourne.

The estate agency, on Whitburn Street in Bridgnorth, now boasts a £140m portfolio, comprising one and two-bed apartments and family homes, to executive houses and multi-million properties that attract professional athletes and business leaders relocating to the area.

This growth places the company as one of the market leaders in the WV postcode area for 'new instructions and 'lets agreed' – testimony to the investment in time and funding it has put into establishing a dedicated seven-strong team and a client service strategy that makes life easy for all parties.

The company, which first started its lettings operation in 2002, has also developed its private off-market luxury rentals offer even further, attracting £75,000 in rent every month, from this sector alone.

End of an era for dedicated couple



Sebastian's situated in Willow Street, Oswestry

Mark and Michelle Fisher admit they will probably shed a few tears when they finally say farewell to Sebastian's in Oswestry after 34 years.

The Willow Street site went on the market for just under £700,000 after the duo announced plans to retire. It has eight en-suite bedrooms and a four-bedroomed private owners' apartment.

Sebastian's has been run as accommodation and breakfast only for the past year, having previously been a restaurant with rooms which once employed 15 people and attracted celebrity customers.

Mark said: "There is huge potential if the restaurant were to be reopened, or the property could be converted into a number of homes. In fact, the original property was split into three units until the late 1960s and there is nothing to stop it being turned back, subject to planning permission.

"We shall certainly shed a tear when we leave because Sebastian's has been our life and we have been very lucky to have lasted through two or three recessions and Covid. We would like to thank all our customers who have supported us over the years."

Driving expansion of a software developer

Telford-based software development company Beta ONE Innovations has secured £5,000 funding to help drive expansion.

The cash has come from the First Enterprise – Enterprise Loans scheme, under the British Business Bank's Start Up Loans programme for product expansion.

Beta ONE Innovations develops software projects, beginning with Yourl, a website hosting and design service. It is now looking to expand the product range to e-commerce stores, online platforms, and educational apps.

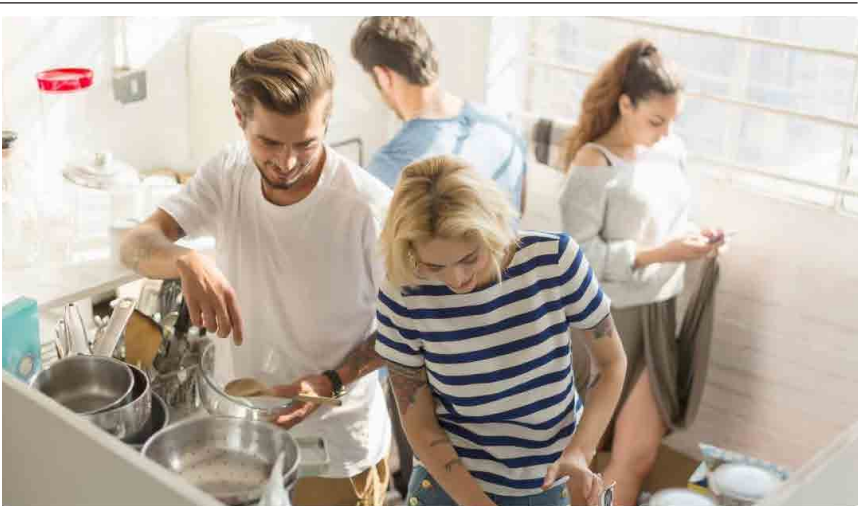
Co-founders Thomas Watts and David Tomlinson say the funding will primarily be used to develop their new projects and reach a wider audience through advertising.

"The team's support was absolutely superb, with regular calls to track our application's progress and frequent updates that made the process feel seamless," the duo said.

James Minott, business adviser at First Enterprise – Enterprise Loans, said: "It's been a pleasure working with Tom through his application journey as he made the process very easy with no faults from start to finish. I strongly believe Beta ONE Innovations will be a great success, and I am honoured to support the first steps towards this."

Richard Bearman, managing director of Small Business Lending, British Business Bank, added: "We know a Start Up Loan can make a difference to helping start-ups grow and business owners to achieve their entrepreneurial dreams. We wish them both every success as they expand."

First Enterprise – Enterprise Loans provides Government-backed business loans ranging from £500 to £250,000 for start-ups and SMEs that are unable to borrow from traditional high-street lenders. The not-for-profit organisation reinvests any surplus into loan funds to further support economic growth and job creation in local communities.



Shropshire technology is helping to keep students in Canterbury safe

County's LINK to safety

Canterbury Christ Church University has upgraded its student accommodation alarm systems by using connected smart home sensors from Oswestry-based Aico.

The university has been upgrading its fire and smoke alarms to the highest level of protection, and includes alarm coverage in all areas where a fire could start.

Alongside fire detection, Aico's HomeLINK Connected Home Solution gathers data on indoor environmental conditions, monitoring indoor air quality.

Connected devices check temperature, humidity, ventilation, and carbon dioxide levels.

Chris Jones, chief executive officer for Aico HomeLINK, said: "Canterbury Christ Church University is just one of the educational institutions we are working with to help keep their students safe and well.

"Notifications allow the university to determine if there is a fire in progress or if the alarm is just a low battery or false activation in error by one of the students."

Aico HomeLINK works with educational institutions across the UK, including the universities of Bristol, Leeds and York, and Harper Adams University in Shropshire.

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Sweet new facilities for the community

New community sports and social facilities in the village of Allscott have been handed over by SJ Roberts, which is building the Allscott Meads community on the site of the former British Sugar factory.

The new two-storey building provides state-of-the-art changing rooms, function rooms, a kitchen, an office and full disabled access, along with five new football pitches, an all-weather bowling green and a natural grass bowling green, which have been installed by specialist sports pitch construction firm, J.Mallinson.

Mike Sambrook, managing director at SJ Roberts Construction, said: "Allscott Meads is a new and already thriving community. We've been committed to not only building sought-after homes, but also the facilities required for sustainable rural living. The new primary school opened in September, and with the completion of the sports and social club, we're a step closer to realising the vision provided by British Sugar.

"The previous sports and social club was already a hub for the existing community, and we're certain that a wide range of ages across the increased local population will enjoy these new and improved facilities for many years to come."

Once complete in 2026, Allscott Meads will offer 470 new homes, and in addition to the primary school and sports and social club, work will commence early in 2024 on several retail and commercial units to complete the development.

Olivia Seccombe, head of corporate affairs at British Sugar, said: "When the sugar beet factory was operational, the sports and social club was a focal point for both the workers and residents of Allscott. Its closure provided the community and all interested parties with the opportunity to build a legacy for a growing community of all ages."

Neil McManus from Northern Trust, the land promoter and project manager for the Allscott project, said:

"There have been significant financial inputs from both British Sugar and SJ Roberts, and these have allowed us to seek some match funding from Sport England and the Football Foundation to move the delivery from 'improved and renewed' facilities, to the superior offering we see today."



Mike Sambrook and Neil McManus



The new Allscott Sports & Social Club

Driver training courses on offer

Shropshire-based Dulson Training has won a contract to provide fully-funded driver training courses for people who struggle with maths.

People aged 19 plus in the county who do not have a GCSE in maths or the equivalent and feel this is a barrier to a driving career, may be able to access an all-important Driver CPC course free of charge.

Dulson Training has been chosen as one

of the delivery partners in the Multiply Funded Driver CPC contract awarded to Shrewsbury College and funded by Shropshire Council.

Steve Dulson, of Dulson Training, said: "As a provider of lorry and bus Driver CPC training, we often come across drivers who lack confidence when it comes to numeracy.

"This can be a barrier to learning and lead to a fear of a driving career – especially in

terms of dealing with working time directives, complex drivers hours, breaks, or working out the legalities of loading, axle weights and payloads.

"For employees who didn't gain a GCSE in maths or equivalent, assistance is available to help with the mathematical elements of the Driver CPC course which is a requirement for every professional lorry or bus driver."



A Shropshire cheese board



Venison wellington main course

Dinner party champions with a pantry full of ideas

By Carl Jones

You know what they say . . . the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Not to mention the starter and main course.

That's particularly true when it comes to The Host's Pantry, a fast-growing Shropshire company which specialises in helping to create and share a home-cooked luxury dining experience.

The business is run by Jess Beardmore and Scott Woodland, whose mission is to take the stress out of hosting at home by curating recipes, sourcing premium produce and ingredients, and delivering everything in one neat package straight to the door.

The business has expanded its premises in Marchamley Wood, north of Shrewsbury, and taken on a new staff member and external marketing team.

It has also bought the Shropshire Hamper Company, allowing the company to grow its gift offering to include hampers filled with locally-produced ambient food and drink.

It took a few years for the business to get off the ground. Aged 18, Scott made an impromptu decision to hop on a train to London where he built a career in hospitality, eventually managing restaurants in the capital, which began his obsession with food, wine, and recipes.

Soon an idea for a new business was born: to elevate the everyday recipe box into a luxury option to make hosting at home simple. They would provide a collection of carefully-crafted recipes tailored to entertaining, and quality ingredients steeped in provenance.

As Scott and Jess were both working long hours in full time jobs, the idea remained just that. But years later, the pandemic gave them the space to turn the idea into reality.

In 2020, a friend designed a logo – so to say thank you, they put together their first recipe



Scott and Jess, the owners of The Host's Pantry

box. The recipients loved the box, and shared the result with friends, who ordered boxes too, and the business grew from there.

"Although the idea for The Host's Pantry has been bubbling under the surface for years, it's only now that it feels we are in full swing with orders for our hosting at home boxes flying off the shelves," said Jess.

So, there's only one thing for it – to give it a try. You can build your own recipe box, or try one of the curated selections. We ordered a three-course recipe of scallops with artichoke puree, followed by venison wellington with pommes duchesse and a marsala sauce, and rounded off with a Shropshire cheese board.

The pack comes with easy-to-follow and helpfully colour-coded recipe cards, split into two sections – plan and prep, and cook and serve.

It tells you how long each stage of the meal should take to prepare, to help you be as time-efficient as possible in the kitchen. That's a very important helping hand where I'm concerned!

As with any food experience, preparation is everything, and a message from Scott and

Jess encourages you to take time to familiarise yourself with the hosting guidelines.

There's also a QR code which takes you to a short video from Jess, where she talks you through the recipe pack.

As long as you've got your own staple kitchen cupboard ingredients on hand like cooking oil, salt and pepper, which don't come with the recipe pack, then you're good to go.

Our feast took just over an hour to prep, and then about another 45 minutes to cook and serve, and cutting to the chase, it was fabulous.

Fun to create, mouthwatering to eat, and the main course – with venison supplied by one of Shrewsbury Market Hall's traders – tempted us back for seconds.

I'm no Egon Ronay in the kitchen, but this allows anyone, whether they're an experienced home cook or not, to feel like they can rustle up and host a special meal at home. The Host's Pantry also sells gift vouchers and gift boxes, so you can treat one of your nearest and dearest – then you just have to make sure you persuade them to invite you round for dinner!

Expand skills through leadership programme

A new leadership programme is being launched in Shropshire in February, aimed at giving 'ambitious business leaders' the chance to expand their skills and build a targeted action plan.

It is being delivered by the team from the Aston Centre for Growth, and is fully-funded for founders or chief executives of companies with operational addresses in the county.

The Aston team says: "You'll not only gain the confidence to make informed decisions but also acquire the tools and strategies necessary to boost productivity and resilience."

It will provide insights from experts in small business leadership and management through interactive workshops, with one-to-one mentoring to help tackle business challenges.

There will also be sessions on how to build a targeted action plan for your business with support from experts, how to develop connections with other ambitious business leaders, and access an Innovation Voucher grant to support growth.

There is only one cohort being run in Shropshire, starting on February 21 with further sessions on February 28, March 20, April 10, April 24, and May 15.

To qualify, the business needs to have been trading for at least 12 months, and the applicant must be a sole trader, micro business, small and medium-sized enterprise, or large business. It also includes social enterprises where these engage in economic activity.

Participants need to make a 'significant commitment of time and effort to engage with the opportunities provided' and are required to attend all workshops.

● For more details, and to register, go to the Aston University website – www.aston.ac.uk – and add 'Shropshire' to the search box



Retiring chair Peter Quinn (left) with Ben Payne

New guidance lead

An Oswestry-based charity offering independent support and guidance to disabled and vulnerable people across the county has a new face in the chair.

Ben Payne was appointed to lead the trustees of the Shropshire Peer Counselling and Advocacy Service at the annual meeting. He is a former journalist and PR professional who has worked for national organisations such as the National Lottery Community Fund. He is now operations director for 7video in Shrewsbury.

Ben is also a volunteer for the Teenage Cancer Trust and a mentor with The Prince's Trust. He is currently training to be a

counsellor specialising in person-centred therapy.

The charity provides one-to-one support and guidance for any adult with a disability who needs an independent advocate to help them speak up for themselves, get the information they need and make choices about their circumstances often at the most difficult times in their lives.

"Very often people with a disability are overlooked. They often struggle to get their voices heard or can struggle with things that many of us take for granted. But PCAS can offer a shoulder to lean on and a vital lifeline to some of the most vulnerable people in our community," said Ben.

Ben takes over from Peter Quinn who has been a trustee with the charity for more than 10 years.

Advertisement Feature

Recession averted, but fatigue persists

Widespread expectations of a recession in the UK have not yet come to pass, but the way forward looks to be one of very slow growth at best.

Economic forecasts for 2023, which predicted a shallow recession, now appear to have been pessimistic – but only slightly.

The Bank of England has raised interest rates 14 times since the economic 'tightening' cycle began in December 2021. This was an attempt to get inflation under control, and it looks as though this tactic has worked – most economists and policy-makers are predicting we have reached peak levels of both. However, they are also predicting that rates will need to stay at current levels for some time in order to prevent inflation creeping back.

The economy, meanwhile, is hardly booming – and it can easily take a year or more before the effects of rate hikes are visible. This means the impact of the already-implemented interest rate rises will continue well into 2024, and we are likely to see a resulting slowdown in economic growth over the coming twelve months.

This has also had a profound result on the property market, which is going through a period of adjustment to the "new normal". The higher rates are increasing mortgage costs, with an additional knock-on effect on prices.

We expect inflation to continue to fall, albeit at a slower rate than

previously predicted. Hopefully this will be followed by interest rate cuts by mid-2024. However any such action will be taken in a very cautious way so not to undo the good work achieved to this point. With this in mind, it is always important to seek advice when looking at any borrowing. So if you are considering making big financial decisions in the next few months, now is the time to talk to your bank.

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Law Society dinner

Shropshire Law Society held its annual dinner at Shrewsbury Town FC. Companies represented included Lanyon Bowdler, PCB, Wace Morgan, GHP, Fodens, MFG, Clarkes, Hatchers, St John Buildings, Cornwall Street Chambers, plus Handelsbanken, Aaron & Partners, and WR Partners.

Outgoing president Danny Smith, partner and head of the criminal department at PCB Solicitors, spoke of his pride at holding the position for the past 12 months. He has now handed the Shropshire reins to his successor Lucy Speed of Lanyon Bowdler.

The event also included a Q&A with guest of honour Mickey Bushell, the gold medal winning paralympic wheelchair racer from Telford, and a charity 'heads and tails' game, hosted by Shropshire Business editor Carl Jones, which raised £800 for the evening's chosen charity, West Mercia Search and Rescue.



A magician performed at the pre-dinner drinks reception



A selfie for Gemma Hughes and Jennifer Richards



Adam Hawkes



Shropshire Law Society held its annual dinner at Shrewsbury Town FC



Live music was provided by party band Fourphit



Kate Cooper



The event raised £800 for the evening's chosen charity, West Mercia Search and Rescue



Companies represented included Lanyon Bowdler, PCB, Wace Morgan, GHP, Fodens, MFG, Clarkes, Hatchers, St John Buildings, Cornwall Street Chambers, plus Handelsbanken, Aaron & Partners, and WR Partners



Guest of honour Mickey Bushell with Phil Cooper and Philippa Beevor-Reid



Danny Smith of PCB Solicitors, Shropshire Law Society president



Ryan Bickham in conversation



Sarah Anderson at the pre-dinner drinks reception



Man on the mic - Shropshire Business editor Carl Jones



Steve Arnold of West Mercia Search and Rescue explains about their work



Matthew Bowering, Lucy Speed, Dawn Humphreys and Praveen Chaudhari



Sophie Price, Kelly Davies and Emma Jones

Beginning of the nursing journey

The work of health professionals in Shropshire has been boosted by the very first nursing graduates from University Centre Shrewsbury's BN Nursing programme.

Among them are Jane Bloore, 31, from Market Drayton, who plans to work in palliative care. Her tutors hailed her as a 'brilliant' asset to the community.

Katie Blythe, 23, from Shrewsbury was described by her tutors as consistently demonstrating her commitment to the nursing programme, and she has joined the Severn Fields Medical Practice as a trainee practice nurse.

Steve Thomas, 31, from Craven Arms is now working as a nurse at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital. He said: "The best part of UCS was the supportive staff that helped us throughout the course during the uncertain times of Covid."

Vicky Ridgway, associate dean in the faculty of health, medicine and society, said: "We are incredibly proud of all they have achieved."

"This is just the beginning of the nursing journey here in Shropshire and we look forward to supporting the workforce needs of the region by educating more highly-skilled nurses."



Graduates from the UCS nursing cohort



Ellen Plowright

Home is where the heart is for Ellen

An associate rural surveyor has returned to her home county to progress her career with Halls, the estate agents, chartered surveyors, auctioneers and valuers.

Ellen Plowright, 27, from Bridgnorth, joins the rural professional services team led by associate director Louise Preece and Anne-Marie Brettell, head of professional valuations and infrastructure, at the company's Battlefield head office in Shrewsbury.

A farmer's daughter, Ellen has moved to Halls from a Birmingham agency and has specialist experience of infrastructure work, compulsory purchase and compensation, as well as farm budgets, tenancies and agri grant applications.

She hopes to complete the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants qualification this year.

"Having previously worked in Warwickshire, Mid Wales and Cheshire, I have now come home to Shropshire and I'm looking forward to working with farmers again," said Ellen, a First Class Honours graduate in Rural Enterprise and Land Management from Harper Adams University.

"There are a lot of infrastructure projects happening, not only Government road programmes, but also power lines and windfarms. I am here to help farmers impacted by these projects," she said.

Former apprentice takes on a new role

A Shropshire-based former construction apprentice has been awarded a full-time position as assistant site manager with Morris Property.

Nathan Jones, 22, accepted the role after completing a level four construction site supervisor apprenticeship with the company and Shrewsbury Colleges Group.

He said: "I was fortunate to have been given plenty of opportunity to demonstrate new skills and take responsibility as my apprenticeship progressed."

"A particular highlight for me was being able to work with the team on the new Midlands Air Ambulance base in Cosford. It was a lot more responsibility than I expected, and a truly unique opportunity which I am grateful to have been given."

Steve Flavell, construction manager at Morris Property, said: "We have been impressed with Nathan's progress over the past three years and were delighted to offer him a full-time role when his course completed. He has worked really hard."

David Perry, HNC construction lecturer from Shrewsbury Colleges Group, added: "Nathan's engagement throughout his apprenticeship shone through, which was reflected in his successful end point assessment."



Nathan Jones, assistant site manager

Creative director joins consultancy



Dave Parry (left) welcomes Andy Hodnett to the Wellmeadow team

Wellmeadow Consulting of Shrewsbury has appointed Andy Hodnett as its new creative director.

He has nearly two decades of experience in the creative industry, including an 18-year tenure at another Shrewsbury-based business, Yarrington.

Wellmeadow Consulting was founded in 2010 by Dave Parry and Richard Buckle to provide support for privately-owned companies looking to grow.

In his new role, Andy will help

develop strategic marketing campaigns, oversee all creative endeavours, and lead a team of content creators.

He said: "Having had the privilege of collaborating with both national and local clients throughout my career, I am committed to using my extensive experience in the creative industry to drive success in this role."

Managing director at Wellmeadow, Dave Parry, said: "Andy's arrival comes at an exciting time for the company. Over several years we have been steadily building an excellent creative team."

Help for the vulnerable

Graham Wynn has joined the board of the Shropshire Community Foundation – a charity responsible for generating investment and channelling donations to help the most vulnerable communities in the county.

Graham co-founded road safety training business TTC Group alongside his wife Jenny, and was awarded an OBE in 2006 for his contribution to the sector.

They have since set up the Wynn Foundation which gives grants to good causes in Shropshire and is also overseeing the expansion of a Prees-based nursing home, and Wynn Developments (specialising in commercial property investment and management).

Graham said: "I'm looking forward to working with the team to drive the Foundation forward for the benefit of the communities here."

"Both myself and my wife were born and raised in Shropshire and we are committed to our county. We were lucky enough to be successful in our careers and I think we all have to give something back. I'm privileged to be able to do so through our own Foundation and now SCF too."



Graham Wynn

Series of promotions

Beaver Bridges Ltd of Shrewsbury has announced a series of internal promotions.

Richard Hinckley has been promoted to business director, with Craig Woods made head of Beaver Bridges Hire and Clive Evans appointed head of sales.

Chief executive Henry Beaver said: "As our business continues to grow and as we expand the range of bridges and services we offer to our clients, I am delighted that Richard, Craig and Clive have stepped up into these roles."

"Their incredible industry knowledge and experience will be vital as we continue our ambitious plans to grow and develop our business."



Richard Hinckley, Craig Woods and Clive Evans

Youngest ever director for firm

WR Partners, the Shrewsbury-based audit, accountancy and advisory firm, has appointed its youngest ever director.

Alex Riley, who joined the company in 2013, has been promoted to the role of audit director.

The company said his work had been pivotal in providing support to corporate audit clients, ranging from corporate owner-managed businesses to large subsidiaries of multinational corporations, not-for-profit organisations, academies, and independent schools.

Managing partner Helen Spencer said: "Alex is a tremendous example of what can be achieved through hard work and dedication at WR Partners."

"Alex is commercially astute, with real ambition for himself, his team, and the wider business, and he has made major contributions to the ongoing success of our audit practice."

Alex said: "I aspire to encourage further growth within our team while providing reliable support to the vibrant and innovative businesses of the UK."



Alex Riley, director with WR Partners

Design agency's new owners



Nick Richardson and Paula Savage, owners of Source Design Ltd

Two new faces have taken the helm at a Shropshire design agency after the founder decided to enjoy a change of pace after 32 years in business.

Nick Richardson and Paula Savage are the new owners of Source Design Ltd in Shrewsbury, having been employees for the last six and 18 years respectively.

Source Design was launched by Sally Tringham 32 years ago, and is based on Nettles Lane in Frankwell, Shrewsbury, where it will remain employing 12 people. It has national and international clients including Tyrrells, Absolute Collagen, Shloer and Barber's Cheesemakers, along with many clients across Shropshire.

Nick was promoted to director last year and Paula has been named creative director in preparation for the takeover.

Sally said: "After 32 years, it was a huge decision for me to sell the business, however it is a joy to hand over the reins to Nick and Paula, both of whom have been such dedicated members of my team and who I know will continue the business growth and lead the team to even further success."

College unveils vice principals

Telford College has appointed two new vice principals to help spearhead its ambitious expansion and curriculum growth.

Christine Pemberton is the new vice principal for curriculum, while Louise Biffin has taken on the role of vice principal for finance and resources.

Christine previously worked for many years at Shrewsbury Colleges Group, before more recently becoming vice principal at Cardiff and Vale College in south Wales.

She said: "The college is really going places. I want students to enjoy their time with us, and come out with the best results they can."

Louise Biffin is no stranger to Telford College, having spent four years as vice chair of the board of governors. She is an experienced finance leader and non-executive director who has operated in the not-for-profit sector for over 20 years.

She has previously held senior roles at various organisations including Shropdoc, Twycross Zoo, and Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

Louise said: "I love the fact that Telford College pushes people to reach their potential. This is a college with outstanding financial health, recognised by Ofsted as good. I'm looking forward to helping us move up that ladder to get to an outstanding rating."



New vice principals at Telford College, Christine Pemberton (left) and Louise Biffin

Trustee for foundation

Roger Pemberton, who has lived in the county since 1980 and built up a successful distribution business, is a new trustee at the Shropshire Community Foundation.

Since retirement, he has volunteered his time in a number of roles including being a trustee of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, chair of the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity, and his current role as Provincial Grandmaster of Shropshire Freemasons.

He will be supporting the Foundation to distribute funding to communities and areas most in need across Shropshire, drawing on his knowledge of the county and his extensive background in the voluntary and private sectors.

Roger said: "Shropshire has been amazingly good to me and my family. When I started my company I spent a lot of time travelling around the county, meeting customers and making many friends. Their support enabled me to grow my business across the country."

"I'm delighted to join the Foundation and give something back to Shropshire, bringing my experience from previous boards where I've been able to learn a lot about governance and getting things done efficiently and with enthusiasm!"

Shropshire Community Foundation was set up last year to ensure the county had a dedicated resource which matches individuals and businesses looking to donate to the people most in need of their philanthropy.



Roger Pemberton

Farming is in his blood



Duncan Gunn-Russell

Harper Adams University IT specialist Duncan Gunn-Russell is the new president of Newport and District Agricultural Society.

Born and bred in Shropshire, both Duncan's father and brother were agricultural contractors, with his father also running an agricultural hardware premises in Shifnal.

With farming in his blood, he joined the Newport Young Farmers Club in the early 1980s, representing them in national debating competitions up and down the country, before moving to London, where he trained as an audio visual specialist.

He said: "In the early 2000s, I was persuaded by former show president Scott Dobson to help at the show in the parking and gates section – and since then, I've never really managed to escape the clutches of the Newport and District Agricultural Society!"

"It is an honour to have been elected as this year's president, a role which I take extremely seriously." The next Newport Show will be held on July 13, 2024.

Beth joins panel focusing on medical accident cases

An award-winning Shropshire clinical negligence lawyer has earned a prestigious role on a national panel of specialists who deal with medical accident cases.

Beth Heath is head of the clinical negligence team at Lanyon Bowdler and also a partner at the firm. She has established an impressive record specialising in high value, complex cases including birth injuries, maternal deaths and delay in diagnosis.

Beth, who was named the 2022 Clinical Negligence Lawyer of the Year, has now been further recognised as one of the leading lawyers in her field by being appointed to the specialist legal panel of Action Against Medical Accidents (AvMA).



Clinical negligence lawyer Beth Heath

AvMA is a patient-focused charity which helps people who have suffered injury following avoidable medical accidents or errors. The charity looks for solicitors who not only have the highest levels of expertise and experience, but also who are prepared to go the extra mile for their clients.

Beth said: "I am delighted to have been appointed to the specialist panel. AvMA is an amazing charity committed to helping people and their loved ones during what is likely to be the most difficult time of their lives."

"The charity supports individuals whose lives are often totally devastated by failings and errors, helping them through the process of getting their lives back on track."

Beth joins fellow clinical negligence specialists Lucy Small and Emma Broomfield on the AvMA panel.



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Five minutes with...

HANNAH WILLIAMS from Newport describes herself as an ‘illustrator of information’ and has just celebrated the fifth anniversary of her live scribing business, Scribble Inc. She’s now relocated to London, and has her sights set on overseas expansion

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY UNCERTAINTIES IN THE ECONOMY?
Covid had a huge impact by changing the landscape of events; I pivoted to digitally support clients and found deeper purpose in how I work.

WHAT’S YOUR VIEW OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – AN OPPORTUNITY, THREAT, OR BIT OF BOTH?
The opportunity of AI is to be inspired in a new way. Not having to start from square one, but iterating with suggestions. The threat is how we continue to prioritise human intelligence, for example empathy, growth, mindset, and resilience when the pace of life feels exponential.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?
The Scribble Inc team is beginning to grow, and I’ve found new challenges with delegating. What I’ve noticed is the value of patience and trust in people who can deliver better than you can in particular areas. They’d say I’m creative, positive, and resilient. To run a business solo for four years takes a certain character; I am very excited to welcome support to grow.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?
Helping people see their unique story in a new way, showing the value of information visually, and taking people on a journey. In a world where we can be caught up in red tape, I love illuminating the creativity that lives in all of us.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?
Protecting my energy between travel, live scribing, customer interactions, social media, wearing the various hats of being a founder, developing my practice, coaching. Watching my ‘battery’ and adjusting the schedule requires self awareness and honesty about what’s possible!

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?
My solo travels, taking my brother to Silverstone GP, FSB’s Young Entrepreneur 2020 award.

PET HATES?
People who respond before you’ve finished talki... yah yah yah. Frustrating! Active listening that encourages thoughtful questions are my vibe.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?
Journalling, yoga, and cooking. It’s three pillars I come back to when burnout creeps in... awareness of your thoughts, moving your body, and fuelling your body with what you need/want.



Hannah Williams has developed a business through illustration



Hannah's favourite movie



The green, green grass of home – London-based Hannah misses the natural beauty of Shropshire

IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF SOME WISE ADVICE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
No is not a negative word. Don’t feel you have to contort into what’s expected, your feelings are legitimate. Oh and Grandma was right, always send a thank you card... handwritten of course.

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?
The greenery and the people. Wherever I live or visit, I realise how I took the ‘life’ of Shropshire for granted. My eyes are so receptive to green, so now based in London I hunt out these spots. I also really really miss saying ‘good morning’ to people!

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?
LinkedIn and Instagram. I love LinkedIn for connecting with people, as well as the diversity of sharing thoughts, recent projects, highlighting opportunities. Instagram lends itself well to visual work, but I find it can often encourage comparison, which is the thief of all joy.

FAVOURITE MOVIE?
The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?
Exhausted pigeon... I mean, mix of both?

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?
Hilma Af Klint, Kurt Vonnegut, Little Simz, David Hockney, Alexa Chung

WHAT WOULD YOU COOK FOR THEM?
I love hosting dinner parties, usually quite last minute so I go with what’s inspired me recently and the weather on the day.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOU THAT MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY WOULDN’T KNOW.
I can sing the entirety of Cool for Cats by Squeeze (thanks Dad)

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, AND YOUR BUSINESS?
There’s an opportunity to move to Asia this year which both excites and terrifies me! So I see the potential to travel to new places around the world, and discover some places within myself too. Seeing my business and service from different perspectives lights me up. I feel incredibly grateful that a skill born out of my own learning style now helps organisations globally.

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