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ISSUE 55:
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

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MIDLANDS MEDIA AWARDS
Magazine of the Year – winner

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Printed in the UK by The Magazine Printing Company:
www.magprint.co.uk



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2026 PREVIEW: From reflections on the Chancellor's Budget to ongoing skills challenges, we gauge the mood among employers and look at some of the issues at the top of the business agenda. P6-9

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By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor

SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

As we turn the page into a new year, it's impossible not to reflect on the resilience, creativity, and determination that have defined Shropshire's business community over the past 12 months.

The best way to sum up 2025 was a year of both challenge and opportunity. Inflationary pressures tested margins, recruitment remained a thorny issue across many sectors, and the pace of technological change demanded agility from even the most established firms.

Yet, time and again, our county's entrepreneurs, leaders, and innovators demonstrated that Shropshire is not only capable of weathering storms, but of finding ways to thrive in them.

The mood right now feels cautiously optimistic... but with a definite emphasis on caution.

With Rachel Reeves' second budget firing fewer missiles in the direction of business, businesses can begin to plan with a little more certainty - though the need for adaptability remains paramount.

Market towns continue to feel the squeeze, but regeneration projects and community driven initiatives are offering fresh hope. It remains to be seen whether sectors such as advanced manufacturing, agri tech, and hospitality will benefit from the latest national policy shifts.

In this issue, we explore several themes that will shape our business landscape in the year ahead - and find out how one Telford-based business owner found herself face-to-face with the Chancellor at the House of Lords. One of the most intriguing developments in modern management is the rise of fractional leadership. At a time when many SMEs can't justify the cost of full time senior executives, fractional leaders - experienced professionals who work part time across multiple organisations - are becoming a vital resource.

We catch up with some of the many Shropshire-based specialists who are allowing businesses to access high level expertise precisely when it's needed.

As the war for talent continues, could this approach be a game changer for local enterprises seeking to compete without overstretching budgets?

Equally important is the need to recognise what holds businesses back. Too often, organisations are hampered not by external forces, but by internal processes that stifle innovation and slow decision making. Bureaucracy, outdated systems, and a reluctance to challenge 'the way things have always been done' can all act as invisible barriers to growth.

Former Shropshire Council chief executive Andy Begley reflects on the challenges facing our local authorities, and what they could potentially learn from the private sector.

Perhaps the most pressing issue for Shropshire in 2026 is the regeneration of our market towns. These communities are the lifeblood of our county, yet many face declining footfall, empty shopfronts, and the lingering effects of pandemic era disruption. The challenge is not simply economic; it is social and cultural too. A thriving market town boosts local employment, attracts visitors, and strengthens the fabric of rural life.

Shropshire's business community has always been defined by its ability to adapt. This year, that adaptability will be tested once again - but it will also be rewarded.

Those who embrace change, seek out fresh perspectives, and commit to building stronger communities will find themselves at the forefront of growth.

As ever, Shropshire Business will be here to tell those stories: celebrating success, analysing challenges, and providing a platform for the voices that matter.

We're here to share your experiences, and to continue shaping the future of our county's economy together.

Here's to a year of resilience, regeneration, and renewed ambition.

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Shropshire Business Magazine





Sustainability policies will remain at the top of the agenda

A year of change, and possibility

The biggest stories of 2026 will be written by those who dare to adapt, collaborate, and innovate. CARL JONES and ADAM PRINGLE gauge the mood among employers, and highlight some of the big issues on the county's agenda

For businesses in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, the economic challenges are real: recruitment and wage pressures, hospitality reinvention, AI disruption... and the never-ending battle to gain a fair share of the financial pie for rural areas.

Yet the opportunities are equally compelling. With strong partnerships, innovative thinking, and a commitment to skills, business leaders feel there are also enough indicators to suggest we can not only weather the storm, but thrive.

Rachel Reeves' second budget dominated the headlines at the end of the year, and for all the frenzied speculation and undoubted concern among employers, the most talked-about budget in a generation was less radical than many feared.



Partnerships - and the embracing of AI - are two key drivers for 2026



Market towns like Ludlow remain vital to the Shropshire economy

But it certainly wasn't a business-friendly speech either, as the smallprint has begun to unearth serious concern among hospitality companies over extra business rate pressures - and all sectors having to absorb another inflation-busting rise in minimum wage rates.

And so, as the calendar turns to 2026, businesses across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin find themselves at a crossroads. The past few years have been defined by resilience, post-Covid rebuilding, and innovation. Now, the question is not whether more change will come, but how local enterprises will harness it. Skills remain the cornerstone of economic growth. Much work has been done in recent months to ensure that every resident has the opportunity to gain new skills aligned with local business needs.

The emphasis is on lifelong learning, digital literacy, and green skills linked to a carbon-neutral agenda. For 2026, the challenge will be scaling these efforts.

Expect to see greater emphasis on apprenticeships and vocational pathways, upskilling in artificial intelligence and data analysis, and an expansion of adult education, particularly for those re-entering the workforce. Recruitment remains a pressing issue.

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has backed the national Get Britain Working campaign which focuses on reducing economic inactivity. Locally, this means addressing barriers faced by people with long-term health conditions, caring responsibilities, or limited skills. Employers are increasingly aware that recruitment is not just about filling vacancies; it's about inclusion, flexibility, and wellbeing.

Businesses need to offer flexible working arrangements to attract diverse talent, invest in wellbeing initiatives to retain staff, and partner with training providers to create pipelines of skilled workers.

Recruitment challenges are particularly acute in sectors like hospitality and healthcare, where demand outstrips supply. The year ahead will test employers' creativity in finding and keeping talent.

Recruitment challenges are particularly acute in sectors like hospitality and healthcare, where demand outstrips supply. The year ahead will test employers' creativity in finding and keeping talent.

Shropshire's rural market towns - including

Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Oswestry, Whitchurch, and Market Drayton - face unique pressures.

Declining footfall, competition from online retail and rising running costs have unquestionably strained high streets. Yet they remain vital hubs of community and commerce for our county. The challenge for 2026 is balancing tradition with innovation.

We can expect to see continued investment in placemaking and town centre regeneration, a growth in independent retail and food businesses, leveraging local identity, and pressure on commercial landlords to adapt rents and spaces for modern use.

Declining footfall, competition from online retail and rising running costs have unquestionably strained high streets

Shropshire's rural economy is also tied to agriculture and food production. With sustainability high on the agenda, local producers will need to adapt to changing consumer expectations and environmental regulations.

And so to hospitality. This industry has been both battered and buoyed in recent years. Rising costs, recruitment difficulties, and shifting consumer habits have forced pubs, restaurants, and hotels to rethink their models. Yet Shropshire's hospitality sector remains resilient, with a strong emphasis on local produce, experiential dining, and destination tourism.

Hospitality is also a key employer, meaning its fortunes directly impact recruitment and skills strategies. The sector's ability to adapt will be a bellwether for the wider economy. ▶

TEN QUESTIONS TO TACKLE IN 2026

- 1. Skills for growth**
Will collaborations deliver measurable improvements in workforce readiness?
- 2. Recruitment innovation**
How will employers tackle economic inactivity and attract diverse talent?
- 3. Town centre regeneration**
Which rural market towns will successfully reinvent their high streets?
- 4. Hospitality reinvention**
Will experience-led dining and boutique accommodation thrive, and can our rural pubs stay afloat?
- 5. AI adoption**
How quickly will businesses embrace artificial intelligence tools, and what does this all mean to our jobs?
- 6. Green skills and sustainability**
Will carbon-neutral agendas translate into practical business opportunities and become a necessity for employers?
- 7. Tourism growth**
Can Shropshire continue to leverage heritage and food festivals to boost rural economies? And will Shrewsbury Flower Show return?
- 8. Flexible working models**
Will hybrid and remote work become standard across a greater range of sectors?
- 9. Collaboration across institutions**
How effective will partnerships between councils, educators and business support organisations prove?
- 10. Resilience in uncertain times**
How will businesses adapt to global economic shifts, from inflation to supply chain disruption?



Helen Columb of Turas Accountants

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant concept; it is reshaping business operations across Shropshire and Telford at a great pace. From manufacturing to marketing, AI offers efficiency gains, predictive insights, and new customer experiences. Yet it also raises questions about skills, ethics, and employment.

Local businesses are beginning to explore AI-driven recruitment tools to match candidates with roles, predictive analytics for supply chain management, and chatbots and virtual assistants in customer service.

The challenge for 2026 will be ensuring that AI adoption is inclusive, ethical, and aligned with local needs. Skills strategies must include AI literacy, while businesses must balance automation with human creativity... and not assume that everything an AI agent tells you is automatically correct.

But for any of these hopes and aspirations to become reality, businesses need the right sort of playing field for success.

Businesses viewed Rachel Reeves' controversial second budget as tax-heavy but stability-focused, leaving them with mixed feelings.

Many welcomed measures to support startups and investment incentives, yet concerns grew over extended freezes on tax thresholds, reduced pension relief, and rising dividend taxes.

Helen Columb, owner of Telford-based Turas Accountants, says the freezing of income tax thresholds, increase to basic and higher rates of tax for property, dividends and savings income and above inflation rise to the National Minimum Wage, were all significant new developments.

"We are now paying the highest levels of tax in this country that we have ever seen, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility.

"The decision to freeze the tax thresholds for a further three years will mean many more people paying higher taxes, while the introduction of a £2,000 limit on salary sacrifice schemes before National Insurance is paid will impact long-term saving."

James Clark, tax partner at WR Partners, summed it up like this: "The good news? Many of the more radical measures rumoured beforehand didn't materialise. The catch? A three-year extension to frozen tax thresholds means more people will be quietly pulled into higher tax brackets as wages rise.

"The Budget didn't contain the dramatic shake-ups some feared, but the cumulative effect of frozen thresholds, rising tax rates on



James Clark, tax partner at WR Partners

investment income, and tighter reliefs will be felt by many over the coming years.

"If you're a business owner, consider how dividend tax changes might affect your profit extraction strategy. If you're planning to pass on assets, check whether the inheritance tax changes impact your estate planning. And if you're drawing income from property or investments, it's worth modelling what the new rates mean for your cash flow."

Ruth Ross, chief executive of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, said: "This was not what you would describe as a business-friendly budget – but it seems that many Shropshire companies were expecting it to be worse.

"The Chancellor has listened to the business community's calls and made the right choice by not piling major new tax rises on businesses' shoulders, which will calm nerves.

"Business will welcome support for youth employment, stamp duty relief, protection for capital spending, a reduction in business rates multipliers and some investment tax breaks.

The increased salaries will no doubt force some small business owners to make redundancies or even to close their doors

"They will be worried about salary sacrifice changes, mandatory wage increases, and retention of the energy profits levy, which will maintain cost pressures.

"Alongside this, we have seen UK-wide business support funding of almost £1bn axed and replaced with a system of piecemeal support which favours select urban regions. That risks further regional inequality and damage to rural economies."

She added: "The Chancellor's confirmation of a minimum wage rise is probably going to be the biggest worry. Making employment more expensive for business owners risks deepening the jobs crisis, particularly among young people.

"And if the Chancellor wants a sure-fire way to back growth, the answer is to deliver on infrastructure investment across the UK. There was very little in her speech to suggest that



McPhillips director Stuart Mackenzie

significant support for more rural areas such as Shropshire will be at the forefront of their minds.

"Businesses taking part in our quarterly economic surveys have been calling for a long time for a major reform of business rates. There was some tinkering announced in the Budget, but nothing which appears to explain how traders in our market towns can compete on a level playing field with big online rivals."

Stuart MacKenzie, director of the current Shropshire Company of the Year – construction and civil engineering business McPhillips – felt the Chancellor's announcements had not gone far enough to restore the stability needed.

"The construction industry is impacted by almost every part of the economy so any measures which cause taxes to rise takes money out of the economy, puts pressure on businesses and will continue to stall growth.

"Changes to salary sacrifice and minimum wage rises on top of the already hefty National Insurance hike will cause a mammoth administrative headache for businesses and will bring additional costs at a time when they want to be focused on investing in skills, sustainability and CSR initiatives.

"For too long we've heard plenty of promises on infrastructure investment and planning reforms. If we want to see growth in the economy and deliver on projects that will benefit and boost our communities then we need action that translates into a visible pipeline of work.

"The only good news we can take is the Chancellor's commitment to skills and new measures on apprenticeships. As a company committed to training the next generation with a very successful apprenticeship scheme, this will enable us to boost skills and training in-house."

Quantity surveyor Tim Lloyd, owner of CQS Solutions which has bases in Birmingham, Shropshire and Mid Wales, said the Government was elected on the back of promises to build 1.5 million new homes and funding for major new infrastructure projects.

"We have yet to see many signs of those promises being delivered or of very many new public sector tenders coming through. This Budget could have been an opportunity to change that, but I fear that opportunity has been missed.

"I wanted to see real action to make it more affordable to employ new people, to develop the skills and training we urgently need, and to create the economic conditions which would drive growth.



Owner of CQS Solutions Tim Lloyd

"I certainly didn't hear enough to make me think things will change dramatically in the next 12 months and that was disappointing."

Telford-based engineering firm Transicon described the Budget as lacking tangible support for manufacturers.

Jennifer Hughes, general manager of the firm which works with major manufacturers such as BMW, Tata Steel and Muller Dairy, welcomed support with energy costs and access to finance but warned the measures were not enough to restore confidence and growth across the sector.

She said: "The cumulative impact of increased National Insurance contributions, uplift in National Minimum Wage and Corporation Tax is already squeezing margins for many businesses and the additional tax rises and minimum wage rises announced in the Budget will take more money out of the economy and lump further pressure on businesses.

"We're disappointed that there was no real recognition of the burden that industry is facing and the impact this is having on the sector's ability to invest in skills, innovation, AI, cyber security and technology."

Kirsty Smallman, managing director of J&PR Ltd – a PR and content creation agency based in Wellington – said: "The increase in minimum wage across the board is a blow to all businesses, especially small businesses.

"The increase – over 8% increase in one age category – will inevitably push prices up, while also creating a demand for increased salaries



Kirsty Smallman, managing director of J&PR Ltd

for all employees. The increased salaries will no doubt force some small business owners to make redundancies or even to close their doors at a time when they have fought so hard to stay open.

"Surely our unemployment rate is high enough? But it seems the Government is doing everything they can to increase that rate further."

Claire Brook, employment law partner at Shrewsbury-based Aaron & Partners, says the rise in the National Minimum and Living Wage from April 2026, the new cap on pension salary-sacrifice, and the direction of travel on workplace rights reforms will combine to create major cost and compliance pressures.

According to Claire, HR and payroll teams now face 'a significant piece of work' remodelling benefits and rewriting internal policies – and she has urged firms to start planning early.

"This Budget gives employers plenty to absorb. The National Minimum and Living Wage rise from April 2026 is the most immediate cost driver, lifting baseline payroll spend and likely feeding pay-compression pressures. Employers will also be watching the new £2,000 cap on pension salary-sacrifice: from April 2029 – contributions above that level will attract NI, reducing the efficiency of sacrifice schemes and creating a significant piece of work for HR and payroll teams to remodel benefits and communicate changes clearly to staff."

Amy Bould, managing director of Newport-based PR and marketing specialist Be Bold



Amy Bould of Newport-based Be Bold Media

Media, said business rates relief was welcome, but overshadowed by 'yet another hammer blow to the cost of running a business, with inflation-busting wage cost increases'.

"And in a couple of years they're coming for our pension schemes too. You couldn't make it up.

"Rachel Reeves spoke about supporting working people but she's making it systematically harder for the people who actually employ them.

"She's also opened up a huge postcode lottery for businesses that want to drive growth. It was good to see a commitment to a number of 'growth funds' for mayoral areas such as the West Midlands, that's great for businesses based there.

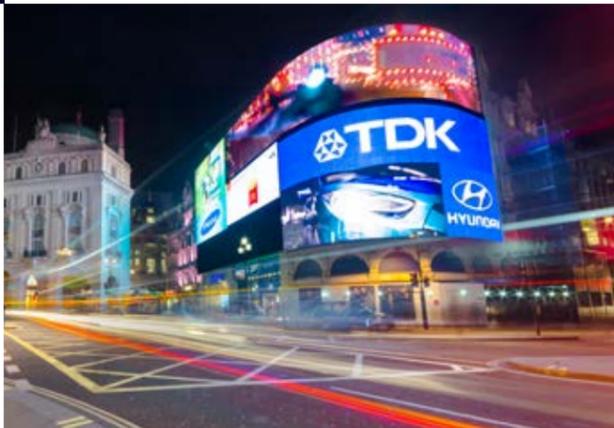
"But if you're a business operating in Shropshire or Telford & Wrekin, where's the investment for them?"

We asked local businesses to tell us their 'wish list' items for 2026. Sarah Hunt from Continuous Process Solutions, which has moved into the county from Dudley, was among those who sent their thoughts.

She said: "Our biggest three wishes are to redevelop our new business headquarters in Jackfield into a modern, dynamic working space for our employees, to secure a commercial manufacturing base in Shropshire, looking to co-locate with a long-standing partner, a fabricating company also moving from the West Midlands to the Marches, and to further augment our team by recruiting and creating exciting opportunities locally."



Businesses watching the Budget speech at Wellington Orbit in an event organised by BBC Shropshire



'Lights corner' at Piccadilly Circus



The company has worked on the roofing at Hong Kong International Airport

Structurally sound

A structural engineering consultancy that has worked on landmark sites including Hong Kong Airport and 'lights corner' at Piccadilly Circus has secured a £400,000 loan to help it expand and take on larger and more complex contracts.

Design 4 Structures has raised the funding from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II, through fund manager Frontier Development Capital.

The company, which employs 60 staff at its headquarters in Telford and office in London, plans to create 10 new jobs in the year ahead and invest in AI to create more advanced modelling tools.

D4S brings together civil, structural and construction engineers alongside modellers and technicians, and has its main base at Telford Enterprise hub, in Hadley Park.

It is believed to be the only consultancy of its type that can advise on every stage of the design process up to construction, including providing detailed specifications of materials.

The company has seen increased demand since the introduction of the new Building Safety Act which, in the wake of the Grenfell fire, requires developers to provide more details of the designs and materials being used.

The business was started in 1992 by a team providing steelwork drawings and models. D4S was acquired in 2011 by current owners Dan Leech and James McNee, who were later joined by Jonathan Lock.

Since then the company has expanded into structural, civil and construction engineering and established satellite teams in Greece and Italy.

It serves clients including Wates, Skanska UK and Berkeley Group, and advises on all types of developments from commercial buildings to high-rise housing, schools and hospitals.

The company has worked on projects including Everton, Tottenham and Wembley stadiums. It also designed the roof of Lucent W1, which houses the giant digital display at Piccadilly Circus, and the roof of Terminal 2 at Hong Kong Airport.

Chief executive Dan Leach said: "D4S is unique in its ability to design right through to the manufacturing and construction level, providing all the detailed information contractors need.

"This is opening up new opportunities for us and we now have a strong pipeline of projects with a construction value of up to £120 million. This investment will help us grow our team to meet demand and provide the working capital required to take on larger contracts."

Ryan Cartwright of Frontier Development Capital said: "Under the current management team, D4S has gone from a small Telford team to a leading structural design firm with an international presence.



D4S directors James McNee, Dan Leech and Jonathan Lock

"It is now uniquely positioned to help the construction industry navigate the challenges created by the Building Safety Act. This funding will enable the business to continue its growth and make the most of the opportunities that are unfolding."

David Tindall, senior investment manager at the British Business Bank, said: "It is encouraging to see another ambitious Midlands born business building on its success and pursuing new avenues for growth in the UK and overseas with support from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II."

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

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

It provides funds to firms that might otherwise not receive investment and helps to break down barriers in access to finance.

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Expansion on the cards for brewer

A brewing company is preparing to expand after moving to new premises on the east Shropshire border.

Wildman Brewing Company, which primarily produces coffee and spirits, has moved into a refurbished commercial unit on the Lizard Lane Business Village in Weston-under-Lizard.

In its new home, the company will operate a coffee roastery, along with a distillery producing gin, vodka, rum and liqueurs. The business also produces dehydrated garnishes such as fruit slices, with plans to expand into sugar syrups.

The company currently sells its products at local artisan markets, with plans under way to see its coffee and spirits offered in bars and shops.

Managing director Timothy Evans said: "Moving into our new premises on the Bradford Estates will create new opportunities for Wildman Brewing Company to grow."

Chris Hodson, property director of Bradford Estates, said: "Their arrival helps us continue to support a diverse local economy, combining the preservation of our business heritage with support for innovative growing companies."



Wildman Brewing Company managing director Timothy Evans (left) with Chris Hodson, property director of Bradford Estates



Shrewsbury businesses have welcomed the news of being awarded best high street

Best high street in the land

Shrewsbury has once again been named Britain's number one high street, after topping The Telegraph's list of the UK's finest shopping destinations for the second year in a row.

The newspaper's travel experts ranked Shropshire's county town number one in its 2025 list of 20 standout high streets – placing Shrewsbury above 19 destinations including Norwich, Bury St Edmunds, Edinburgh and more – praising the town's independent spirit, historic streets and distinctive shopping experience.

In the article, The Telegraph said: "With its meandering streets and blush-sandstone castle wrapped in a loop of the Severn, Shropshire's compact county town is ideal for wandering and window shopping."

The coverage highlights the town's award-winning covered market and singles out Wyle Cop for particular praise, calling it 'a curving, climbing high street lined with 39 listed buildings, ranging from medieval half-timbered to Victorian ornate'.

The article also notes the street's rich history – from Henry Tudor's visit in 1485 to Charles Darwin's favourite coaching inns – and adds that today Wyle Cop is said to be the longest run of independent shops in the country.

Local businesses have welcomed the news, particularly as it shines a spotlight on the town's independent retail scene.

Pollyanna Williams, who owns Snoop, said: "I've been a part of the Wyle Cop's independent scene since 2023; properties are sought after on the street, so I feel very lucky to be in the thick of it all."

"Opening here was the best decision I've ever made. We have such wonderful customers locally and further afield, who travel far and wide to visit us. Shrewsbury's like no other town I've ever come across – it really is a gem."

The accolade adds to a growing list of national recognitions for Shrewsbury's town centre and reinforces its position as one of the UK's most distinctive and successful high streets.

Seb Slater, executive director of Shrewsbury BID, said: "Being named Britain's best high street for a second year running is a fantastic achievement, particularly at a time when high street businesses are facing real challenges."

"This recognition reflects the hard work, resilience and commitment of Shrewsbury's traders, and sends a strong message about the value of vibrant town centres and the people who keep them thriving."

A fraction of time

CARL JONES meets three Shropshire businesswomen who are part of a quiet revolution in strategic business leadership



With economic uncertainty reshaping boardroom priorities, many Shropshire businesses are rethinking how they access senior level talent.

Enter the fractional leader: a flexible, and potentially cost effective alternative to traditional executive hires.

Once seen as a stopgap, fractional roles are now becoming a deliberate and strategic choice, offering firms the ability to scale leadership capacity precisely when and where it's needed most.

These fractional leaders are often former chief executives, business owners or board-level directors who have stepped away from the demands of a single corporate role.

Instead, they now choose to work across multiple organisations in a strategic problem-solving capacity.

For businesses, this means they can bring in a heavyweight leader to tackle specific challenges – whether that's scaling up, entering new markets, or restructuring – without committing to a full-time salary and benefits package.

Shropshire-based trio Sylvie Cowell, Pippa Tait and Shelly Barratt are all part of the revolution, working in their respective specialisms of operations, sales and marketing.

Sylvie runs Cowell & Co near Much Wenlock, Pippa is managing director of Sales Geek Shropshire, and Shelly is the driving force behind Coya Marketing in Shrewsbury.

They want to help companies that have potentially hit a ceiling, or are seeking to chart a path to the next step... ideally before it reaches 'distress' point.

"There are several important questions businesses need to consider when thinking about whether they could benefit from a



Fractional leaders Sylvie Cowell, Pippa Tait and Shelly Barratt

fractional sales director – and maybe even fractional leadership as a whole," says Pippa, who previously spent 20 years in the MedTech industry, supplying to the NHS and other global healthcare providers.

"Often, the founder of the company is still the de facto sales director. They're leading sales not because they want to, but because no-one else is. Strategy, coaching, pipeline review... it's all on their plate, and it's starting to show."

"Maybe the company has full calendars, but empty forecasts – plenty of activity, but not enough outcome. Without strategic direction, coaching and accountability, the pipeline stalls and the conversion rates drop."

"Sometimes a business finds itself drifting instead of driving. They've got great people, good products and big goals – but no defined plan to tie it all together. Growth becomes guesswork instead of execution."

"Or it could be that they have simply hit a growth ceiling, where everything that got them

to this stage won't get them to the next. They need senior-level sales leadership, but without the full-time salary hit."

And that's the big appeal of taking the fractional leadership route. Typically, they are seasoned executives who work with businesses on a part-time or portfolio basis, offering high-level expertise without the cost or commitment of a full-time hire.

Shelly takes on strategic marketing projects for companies which are typically three to five years old and looking to scale up, but have no marketing department – as well as running the Real Ale Trails Company in Shropshire.

When it comes to marketing, she says there's often a degree of confusion at the top level of business.

"People think marketing is just the stuff they see. The website. The advert. The social posts. So they hire someone to make the stuff, spend money on the stuff, and then wonder why the stuff doesn't work."



A growing number of employers are turning to fractional leaders for their specific expertise

“Because nobody asked the questions that come before the stuff. Who are we selling to? What problem do they think they have? Why would they pick us over the three other options they’re comparing us to? What do we say that makes them stop scrolling and actually pay attention?”

“Those questions don’t get answered by a friend doing your website or by a freelancer churning out LinkedIn posts. They get answered by someone who understands strategy, positioning, messaging, and how all of it connects to what your sales team actually does.”

“But here’s why the confusion exists: marketing looks simple from the outside. A logo’s a logo. A website’s a website. How hard can it be?”

“A website built without clear messaging targeted at no one in particular is just an expensive placeholder. Ads without a plan are just budget on fire. Social posts that don’t connect to anything are just noise.”

“The stuff only works when the strategy underneath it is sound. That’s the bit most people skip because they don’t know it exists.”

The number of professionals describing themselves as ‘fractional leaders’ on their LinkedIn profiles has risen from around 2,000 in 2022 to over 125,000 last year.

Figures show that in the first half of 2025, a third of UK chief executives were named on an interim basis. And in the legal profession, it’s estimated that up to a third of general counsel could be working as fractional consultants by the end of the year.

What does this tell us? That companies want flexibility and agility – and need to keep a keen eye on their payroll.

The appeal of fractional leadership lies in its flexibility and cost-effectiveness. Many small and medium-sized enterprises simply cannot afford to employ a full-time C-suite executive.

Yet, these businesses still require the strategic insight and leadership skills that such roles provide. Fractional leaders offer a chance to bridge this gap, with board-level expertise with

a fraction of the cost – or indeed, the increasing amount of baggage and cost now associated with taking on full-time members of staff.

Sylvie, who uses Entrepreneurial Operating System principles and tools to help businesses that are growing quickly, navigating change or feeling the strain, says: “When I get involved with a business, I become part of the leadership team. We work together as a collective to make decisions.”

“In operations, it’s very much a case of organising the chaos that has been gradually building over a period of years, because of a company’s growth.”

“Systems, processes and infrastructure have often not kept pace with the scaling up of the company and recruitment of more staff. The result is that they often have someone doing a bit of marketing who is not a marketer, get people doing sales who are not specialists, and they have reached a plateau.”

And the worst-case scenario in instances like this, she says, is that a company could have lucrative business leads coming in which they are simply unable to service – because not all the team members are following the same operational processes.

“You often find there isn’t a ‘how to’ guide on running the business. Business owners who are visionaries are not always good at the organisational side of the job, or being leaders. They’re really skilled at being able to start up a business, but not so great at putting the structures in place to allow it to grow.”

“Being good at your job, and being good at leading people, are two very different things.”

Fractional leadership is deemed to be at its most valuable in scenarios like this where a business is scaling rapidly but lacks the internal expertise to manage growth.

For example, a technology start-up may need a seasoned financial officer to establish financial controls and investor relations, but only for a few days a month.

Similarly, a family-owned manufacturer entering international markets might benefit from a fractional chief marketing officer with

global experience. Sylvie says: “For me, it’s irrelevant what the product at the end of the particular business is. They could be selling mortgages, or software. On an operational level, I’m just focused on how they work together, and the function of the team members.”

Some of the most common triggers for involving fractional leaders include:

- Leadership gaps following sudden departures
- Projects requiring specialist knowledge like digital transformation, restructuring, or environmental social governance strategy
- Businesses preparing for investment rounds or share sale
- SMEs seeking to professionalise operations without losing entrepreneurial agility

Fractional leaders can inject strategic insight without long-term overheads – giving businesses access to decades of experience without the financial strain of a permanent hire.

They’re not tied to internal politics or legacy thinking, and are used to stepping into complex environments.

If the fit isn’t right, the company can pivot quickly without the complications of full-time contracts – something which will be brought into even sharper focus with the impending Employment Rights Bill.

Sylvie, Pippa and Shelly are joining forces this year on a new venture targeted at SMEs called The Fractionals, with an official launch event planned in the spring.

Shelly says: “As a business owner, it’s often simply the case that you don’t know you’re not doing it right. There’s nothing to compare it to, and you think it’s just normal; that every business is being run like this.”



Sylvie Cowell of Cowell & Co near Much Wenlock

“One of the biggest challenges for fractional leaders, I think, is accessing the right level of networking – getting to meet the relevant people in an environment where we can have the right sorts of conversations.”

Having worked with big corporate employers for over 20 years, Pippa now acts as a fractional sales director with clients worldwide, from Canada to Kazakhstan; across various sectors, with different blends of skill-sets.

“As a Salopian, I’m keen to do more work in Shropshire. I sometimes feel the county is a little bit behind when it comes to absorbing fractionals into their teams and understanding the potential benefits.”

“Networking is important for me on more than one level. When you are a fractional, you are the support which is going into other businesses to sort out their problems – but you do need to have professional support for yourself too.”

For executives, fractional leadership offers a portfolio career. Many seasoned leaders relish the opportunity to work across different industries, applying their skills to varied challenges. It can also provide greater work-life balance compared to the relentless demands of a single C-suite role.

Just as employees increasingly value flexibility, autonomy, and purpose, so too do senior leaders. Fractional leadership allows them to remain engaged at the highest levels of business while avoiding burnout.

While fractional leadership offers clear advantages, it is not without challenges. Businesses must ensure that part-time leaders are integrated effectively into the organisation. Clear communication, defined responsibilities, alignment with the existing leadership team – and openness and honesty – are essential.

There has to be a cultural fit too. A fractional leader may bring impressive credentials, but if their style clashes with the company’s ethos, the relationship can falter. That’s why careful selection and onboarding



Pippa Tait of Sales Geek Shropshire

is critical. There are now dozens of fractional leaders across Shropshire. Aside from the satisfaction of applying their decades of knowledge and insight to solve diverse problems, there’s a lifestyle appeal too.

Fractional leadership offers greater autonomy, flexibility, and control over workload, making it an attractive option for those seeking a more balanced or portfolio driven career.

Fractional leaders can inject strategic insight without long-term overheads – giving businesses access to decades of experience without the financial strain of a permanent hire.

“At the end of the day, everything comes back to sales,” Shelly says. “Businesses want more sales, and don’t always know where one role’s responsibility in the business ends and another begins.”

Pippa adds: “When we talk about growing a business, the word means different things to different people. They might want to grow their revenue, their profitability, the skill-set or mind-set of their team.”

“And a fractional leader has to think about how they are going to exit all of that. You either upskill a team enough to fulfil that position



Shelly Barratt of Coya Marketing, Shrewsbury

as you exit, or decide if the company needs to recruit in to replace you.

“Those are the two outcomes that you hope will happen. The third is that you part ways because you don’t deliver value, which is often when you don’t have everybody on board with the process.”

Sylvie says: “If that third option turns out to be the case, the company has got some questions it needs to be asking – is that particular person in the wrong seat?”

Shropshire has a significant number of family businesses – and for fractional leaders, the dynamic round these boardroom tables can throw up other challenges. Conversations have to be a lot more sensitive, or refined.

Pippa says: “This is where I’ve written diagnostics, because it gives me something objective to talk to them about; something that is really unbiased.”

Shelly adds: “The people who need marketing are not marketers – we’re not talking about the Richard Bransons of this world. Understanding if they are people who need to be given lots of information, or don’t want too much information, is key. You need to know if they are detail-orientated leaders.”

So what kind of person do you need to be, to carve a successful career as a fractional leader, in the Shropshire trio’s view?

Driven, adaptable, assertive, empathetic, resilient, positive, enthusiastic, inquisitive, unbiased and unafraid of confrontation, and difficult conversations. How’s that for starters?

Working across so many sectors gives fractional leaders a useful sense of the state of the economy. So how would Shelly, Pippa and Sylvie rate the health of the Shropshire business community as we enter 2026?

“That’s a tricky one to answer, because I feel it’s very sector-based,” Shelly says. “I work with lots of pubs in different locations, and they are struggling. Hospitality is definitely in a difficult place right now.”

On the flipside, Sylvie says: “Most of my work at the moment is around software and financial advice sectors, and they are flying.”

A data-driven perspective



Hollie Whittles

It is clear that the past year has marked a pivotal shift in how businesses leverage data and artificial intelligence (AI). What was once considered experimental has firmly become strategic, operational, and value-creating for organisations of every size from nimble Shropshire businesses to ambitious global brands.

At Purple Frog Systems, our work helping UK businesses transform data into business insight has shown a dramatic evolution in approach. In 2025, we saw the narrative move beyond “pilot projects” to AI embedded at scale across analytics, automation, and decision intelligence. AI is no longer a novelty; it is a foundation of competitive advantage.

Several data trends that I wanted to highlight over the past year include:

- Small and medium-sized businesses in particular are recognising the competitive edge AI affords, reporting gains in productivity, forecasting accuracy, and customer engagement, areas where robust data strategy makes all the difference. We have noticed that businesses are often struggling to know where to start and need help to take that first step forward and define an AI Strategy.
- There has been a shift away from static, backward-looking reporting toward dynamic, self-service analytics that support faster, better decision-making. Businesses need their data to answer not just what happened, but why it happened and what might happen next. This shift also highlighted the importance of strong data foundations with analytics maturity no longer measured by the number of dashboards produced, but by the quality, consistency, and impact of the decisions they enabled.
- There has been a significant rise in AI adoption across all industries, with many organisations deploying AI in production rather than isolated experiments. Leaders now view AI as a core spending priority shifting from curiosity to commitment.



What 2025 proved beyond doubt is that data and AI go hand-in-hand. Organisations that tie AI capabilities directly to robust data infrastructure combining analytics, governance, and predictive insights are the ones achieving measurable outcomes rather than theoretical promises. At Purple Frog, our focus on data excellence as a precursor to AI success has helped clients unlock new operational efficiencies and strategic foresight, often where legacy reporting once constrained decision-making.

What 2026 holds

Industry forecasts and research point toward three core shifts:

- 1. Unified analytics at scale:** Microsoft Fabric is increasingly positioned as the next-generation analytics platform, bringing together data engineering, warehousing, machine learning, and business intelligence into a single, cohesive ecosystem. Power BI remains the front-end for visual insight, but within Fabric it gains access to a unified data foundation reducing silos and enabling real-time, scalable analytics across the organisation.
- 2. AI as a true business partner:** Rather than serving as isolated tools, artificial intelligence models will increasingly act as collaborative assistants that enhance teamwork, security, and research – unlocking productivity gains previously unattainable with conventional software.
- 3. Real-time & predictive intelligence:** In 2026, tools like Direct Lake and Real-Time Intelligence within Fabric will enable Power BI to deliver dashboards that reflect data instantly as it is updated, while AI and predictive analytics increasingly surface trends and forecasts directly within reports. This means businesses can act faster and with greater confidence than ever before.

4. Responsible & accountable AI growth:

With deeper integration comes the responsibility to govern, secure, and ethically manage data and AI systems. Businesses that build robust frameworks around trust and transparency will earn greater stakeholder confidence.

5. AI-Driven insights with Copilot integration:

Copilot integration, whether embedded in Power BI or hooked into Fabric workflows, will accelerate insight generation. Analysts will be able to ask natural language questions of their data, automate complex tasks, and explore predictive scenarios without deep technical expertise. This trend democratises data insight generation across teams.

6. Enhanced governance & single source of truth:

Microsoft Fabric’s integrated governance and security tools like Power BI Sentinel will help organisations maintain compliance and trust in their analytics. As data privacy requirements tighten and data estates grow, the ability to manage lineage, access, and quality will be a critical differentiator.

For Shropshire businesses, this presents a tremendous opportunity. With data becoming more democratised and AI tools more accessible, organisations can drive impactful change without disproportionate budgets. Whether it is refining customer experience, predicting demand, or automating routine tasks, the companies that succeed in 2026 will be those that choose strategic deployment over shiny experimentation.

As I reflect on the last 12 months, one truth stands out: the businesses that embrace data and AI with clarity of purpose prioritising goals, governance, and growth are the ones shaping tomorrow’s competitive landscape today.

Here’s to a 2026 defined by intelligent decision-making, operational resilience, and sustainable growth. Let’s make it our strongest year yet.

Hollie Whittles is a director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford

Connecting independent estate agents from all around the world

Estate agent Russell Griffin has taken up an advisory position with a central UK-based property marketing group and network, which connects independent estate agents nationally and internationally.

“Agents from every region of the United Kingdom – from the Southwest to Scotland – reported a steady rise in buyer enquiries, more committed sellers, and improving levels of agreed sales.”

We are seeing strong interest in traditional market towns such as Shrewsbury, Ludlow and Telford and the county’s villages

The co-director of Samuel Wood represented the Midlands as the regional executive of the NAEA Propertymark Board from 2017 to 2022, the UK’s leading membership professional body for property agents, and has now taken up a seat on the Mayfair Office Advisory Board.

After attending the latest meeting, he said the mood was that “confidence is returning” to the housing market, and 2026 is expected to be a stronger year.

“Those same patterns are already beginning to surface across Shropshire, particularly in our key towns of Shrewsbury, Ludlow, and the wider rural market where Samuel Wood operates.”

“We are seeing strong interest in traditional market towns such as Shrewsbury, Ludlow and Telford and the county’s villages, as well as growing demand for rural homes and lifestyle-driven moves.”



Advisory role – Russell Griffin

Hydraulics company now under Swedish ownership

Ludlow-based hydraulics specialist Flowfit is under new ownership after being taken over by a fast-growing Swedish industrial group.

The company, which employs more than 40 people with its headquarters at Parys Road, has become part of Axel Johnson International’s business group Driveline Solutions.

The new owners say the acquisition reinforces Driveline Solutions’ strategic focus on the hydraulics segment and establishes a ‘strong platform for growth’ in the UK market.

The value of the deal has not been disclosed, but Flowfit will continue to operate as an independent company. Simon Parsonage remains in his current role as managing director and retains a minority shareholding.

Flowfit makes and distributes hydraulic components and systems, serving off-highway sectors including agriculture and forestry, as well as marine and industrial applications.

Its range includes power packs, cylinders, valves, motors, pumps, hoses, connectors, and filtration products. In addition to its Ludlow headquarters, it also has a sales office in Wellingborough.

“Flowfit is a family business built on solid

values and long-term commitment, which aligns very well with Driveline Solutions’ culture and strategy,” said Jan Brattberg, managing director of Driveline Solutions.

“This acquisition represents a natural step in the continued development and expansion of our hydraulics business.”

This acquisition represents a natural step in the continued development and expansion of our hydraulics business

“Flowfit complements our existing companies in terms of suppliers, market segments, and capabilities, and further strengthens our presence in the UK.”

Simon Parsonage said: “We see great opportunities to grow the business further and reach new heights together. Axel Johnson International is a long-term, responsible, and value-driven owner with deep industrial knowledge and a hands-on approach – an ideal partner for our continued growth journey.”

Since Flowfit launched in 1996, the company has built its success by becoming one of the industry’s powerhouse hydraulic suppliers of fluid power products and bespoke hydraulic power units.

It increased its warehousing space in south Shropshire in 2022 to meet growing demand, and has 47,000 sq ft on its two-acre site.

Axel Johnson International is a privately-owned Swedish industrial group operating globally. The group says it has a ‘dedicated long-term approach to ownership’, emphasising sustainable progress and collaboration.

The Flowfit deal is one of a series of acquisitions made by Axel Johnson in recent months. It has also acquired a majority share in NEW Network Engineering in Finland, taken on the Czech-based Raveo Group, and strengthened its presence in Australia with the takeover of Matric Process Solutions.

The group now consists of more than 200 companies and employs 6,000 people in 35 countries.



The Aico Community Awards will return to the ICC this year

Community awards returns

Three-time Shropshire Company of the Year Aico is bringing back its biennial Community Awards this year to celebrate excellence and inspirational achievements across the UK housing industry.

The winners will be crowned at The International Convention Centre in Birmingham on April 16 – and nominations are now being invited.

The event provides businesses with the opportunity to showcase inspirational colleagues, projects and innovations from the housing sector.

The last awards – held in 2024 – also raised over £9,000 for the Electrical Industries Charity, with Aico matching the donation to result in a total contribution of £18,000.

This year's ceremony will welcome over 450 guests, including finalists from all award categories. Continuing its support for the EIC, the evening will feature a formal dinner, influential guest speakers and live entertainment, all hosted by Shropshire Business editor Carl Jones.

"We're proud to bring the Community Awards back for 2026," says Aico managing director Neal Hooper. "These awards are about recognising the real difference individuals and organisations make every day in improving lives and communities across the UK."

New for 2026, the People's Choice Award introduces an exciting interactive element to the evening. This special category will be voted for exclusively by attendees on the night, giving guests the chance to play a direct role in recognising excellence.



Aico managing director Neal Hooper



The 13 other award categories are now open to enter by either groups or individuals from across the UK. All entries must be submitted by February 20.

Kelda Wood, founder of Shropshire-based charity Climbing Out, was one of the guest speakers at the last event.

She said: "It's fantastic to be building a relationship between Aico and Climbing Out, and I was delighted to have been able to support the awards evening. It was such a great opportunity to recognise people doing amazing work in the community."

2026 CATEGORIES

- Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative
- Neighbourhood Transformation
- Resident Engagement
- Lifetime Achievement Award
- Woman in Fire Safety Award
- College Initiative of the Year
- Rising Star Award
- Electrical Contractor of the Year
- Inspirational Colleague of the Year
- Sustainability Project of the Year
- Best Distributor Community Initiative
- Collaborative Partnership
- Apprentice of the Year

Carl Jones, who compered the evening, said: "It was heart-warming to see how much these awards mean to all the inspirational individuals and groups who have been shortlisted for such fantastic work in their local communities.

"Congratulations to Aico for launching such a brilliant initiative, shining a light on these unsung heroes at what I'm sure will be another tremendous night of celebration."

Full details can be found at www.aico.co.uk/news-and-events/aico-community-awards-2026/

Celebrating a decade of success

Shropshire Business magazine is 10 years old this year – and we're marking the occasion by teaming up with Shropshire Festivals for a special evening event this spring.

Shropshire Business Festival is taking place on March 5 at Telford International Centre – and the daytime event will be followed by a special 'Shropshire Does Business Dinner'.

Front cover stars from the last ten years of Shropshire Business magazines are being invited to be special guests, talking on panels throughout the evening to reflect on their business journeys, and discuss what the future looks like for the local economy.

The main festival is a free one-day networking event that brings together business leaders and emerging talent from across the county. The event hosts exhibitors, seminars and marketing and business growth workshops from Clear.

A new speed networking area is being introduced for 2026, and there are also plans to have finance, legal and business experts on hand to offer advice.

"Our free business event creates the perfect, relaxed atmosphere where attendees can forge new partnerships and connections," said Beth Heath from Shropshire Festivals.

"Our unique festival atmosphere will help attendees build their network and drive results for the year ahead.

"Last year we welcomed over 800 attendees, and we believe our 2026 event will be even more popular, with businesses wanting



Helen Columb of Turas



The Nuffield Health team at last year's event



to drive sales, build leads and reach their 2026 goals."

Shropshire Business Festival is a hub for the county's decision-makers. Companies can showcase products and services while engaging in face-to-face conversations with potential clients and partners.

- Secure your free ticket or apply for a stand at www.shropshirebusinessfestival.co.uk



Ray Hickinbottom from the Federation of Small Businesses

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Morris Property driving for regional growth in 2026



Robin Morris, Morris & Company

As we power forward into 2026, Robin Morris, Chairman at Morris & Company, reaffirms the company's strategic direction for its family-run property business.

"At Morris Property we constantly look to build on our heritage and 2026 will be no exception. Continuing to invest and grow

our footprint within Shropshire is important to us, investing in our portfolio and working on partnership construction projects as well as our own developments. With the recent launch of our Morris Capital brand, we have a new platform to extend our interests into the wider Midlands market in 2026 which is brimming with opportunity for investment and development."

MORRIS
CAPITAL

Targeted investment and senior expertise

Growing the geographical footprint is newly recruited Chartered Surveyor Nick Wood who joined the Morris business in November 2025 from Savills in Birmingham, where he was a Director in their UK Investment team.

With over 17 years' experience, Nick's appointment as Chief Executive Officer of Morris Capital reflects the business's commitment to investing in both people and place. His extensive track record across all commercial sectors,

combined with deep regional market knowledge and extensive professional network, will help strengthen the company's presence and allow the business to unlock value across the Midlands region.

The region's strong credentials, driven by infrastructure improvements, economic diversification and a growing occupier base, align closely with Morris' strategy for investment.



Nick Wood, Morris Capital

Farmers welcome latest policy U-turn

Farming groups have expressed a mixture of delight and relief after the Government watered down its controversial inheritance tax plans.

Proposals to change the rules for agricultural property relief and business property relief come into force in April.

Until the latest policy climbdown, it would have seen an effective tax rate of 20% on agricultural assets valued over £1 million. That threshold has now been raised to £2.5 million.

The original plans triggered angry protests, with many Shropshire farmers joining demonstrations in Westminster. The plans also sparked criticism from MPs in rural seats.

Shrewsbury MP Julia Buckley was among dozens of Labour MPs not to vote in support of the plans and, reacting to the latest announcement, North Shropshire MP Helen Morgan called for the Government to now go further and scrap the tax completely.

"We have spent the past 14 months campaigning and lobbying to try and mitigate the worst of the impacts of the proposals," said National Farmers Union president Tom Bradshaw.

"After it became clear that this policy wasn't going anywhere, we have focused our campaign to mitigate the worst of its impacts for

the majority. This announcement will come as a huge relief to many. While there is still tax to pay, this will greatly reduce that tax burden for many family farms, those working people of the countryside."

He added: "Changes to Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief announced in the 2025 Budget came as a huge shock to the farming community.

"Until that moment, the best tax planning advice was to hold on to your farm until death and pass it on to the next generation who could continue to run a viable farming, food producing business.

"The original changes to APR and BPR, resulted in a pernicious and cruel tax, trapping the most elderly and vulnerable people and their families in the eye of the storm. The NFU and its members have stood strong for what we believed in. I am thankful common sense has prevailed and government has listened."

In an announcement issued two days before Christmas, after MPs had left for the recess, environment secretary Emma Reynolds said: "We have listened closely to farmers across the country."

The Country Land and Business Association said the Government deserved credit for recognising the flaws in the original policy and changing course, but said this change 'only limits the damage'.



Biology adviser Ai-Linh at Darwin Biological in Shawbury

Invitation to see school supplier

Darwin Biological, which provides specimens and specialist supplies to secondary schools, invited representatives from CLEAPSS, which provides support in science and technology for schools, to its base in Shawbury.

Biology adviser Ai-Linh visited the family-run firm in a bid to ensure they continue to be responsive to modern educational needs.

Meg Bilson, founder and managing director of Darwin Biological, said: "We spent a few hours together conducting experiments that we recommend to school science technicians, and even though it was originally only a session for our lab staff, all our staff ended up getting involved because it was so much fun."

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New business networking events available at Telford College

Telford College is launching a new series of employer networking events – kicking off with a session exploring the fast-moving worlds of artificial intelligence and cyber security.

The inaugural morning event is being held on February 13 at the college's Wellington campus, starting at 9am.

Speakers already confirmed include Dan Vaughan (business change consultant at Capgemini), and cyber security professor Haider Al-Khateeb. Sarah Davies, executive director of partnerships and employer

engagement at Telford College, said: "This is the first in a new series of business networking events we will be holding at our campus.

"Our theme for this first session is AI and Cyber Security, with exclusive talks from industry leaders on how knowledge in these spaces can unlock new efficiencies, strengthen resilience, and drive growth across your business.

"It is a theme more relevant than ever, and the content will deliver useful takeaways for any attendee, regardless of their sector."

Sarah added: "This event will also provide local employers with a unique opportunity to connect and share ideas with free tea, coffee and refreshments on hand."

The event is due to conclude at 10.30am, when businesses will be able to take up the invitation of a campus tour, or further talks to discuss partnership opportunities.

For more details, call the employer engagement team at Telford College on 01952 642200, or email employability@telfordcollege.ac.uk

College is recognised for its 'innovation' in training

Telford College has been named as a finalist in the prestigious national Apprenticeship and Training Awards.

An independent panel of expert judges assessed more than 650 nominations from employers, training providers, colleges and universities.

Telford College is one of just four finalists in the category for 'innovation in training and delivery'.

A parliamentary reception will take place at the House of Lords as part of National Apprenticeships Week in February to recognise the 2026 finalists, and the winners will then be announced at a gala dinner on March 3.

The awards are run jointly by FE Week and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, and delivered in partnership with City and Guilds.

Sarah Davies, executive director of partnerships and employer engagement at Telford College, said: "We are thrilled to be shortlisted for such a prestigious award.

"Our work in partnership with the Integrated Care System has had a significant impact on the workforce and transformed the way training is delivered.

"With the sector under immense pressure, we've embraced creativity and innovation in our delivery methods, and we're delighted to see this recognised."

Shane Mann, chair of the judging panel and chief executive of FE Week's publisher EducationScape, said: "There were some lively debates among the judges, which speaks to the high standard of nominations from a sector that is constantly innovating and raising the bar."

The shortlisting comes just weeks after Telford College celebrated success at the 'Get The Nation Learning' awards, held at the Barbican in London.

Mark Jones, who signed up for Telford College's 'Into Employment' programme to make learning opportunities more attainable for hard-to-reach individuals, won the New Directions award.



Mark Jones with his 'Get The Nation Learning' award



He was nominated in recognition of the significant obstacles he has overcome, and the progress he has made in turning his life around.

"I would like to thank Telford College for giving me the opportunity to retrain – it has impacted my life in such a positive way,"

he said. "From working as a self-employed plasterer for 36 years, with no steady income, I was able to become a professional driver with the security of a regular wage. It's something I'd always wanted to have a go at, but never thought I could."

● Find out more about Telford College's upcoming employability programmes at telfordcollege.ac.uk. Courses running in January and February include HGV, mental health first aid, and short courses including administration, construction, and health & social care



Clickingmad presents £5,000 to West Mercia Search and Rescue

Heroic work is rewarded

As part of its 25th anniversary campaign, Bridgnorth-based Clickingmad Ltd donated £5,000 to West Mercia Search & Rescue – the volunteer-run emergency rescue charity. Managing director Shaun Carvill said: "They're normal people doing truly heroic work, often in challenging conditions, at all hours. With this donation, we hope to help them continue delivering lifesaving support to our communities."

Shrewsbury-based law firm Aaron & Partners has helped seal a major international takeover, with Swiss laundry giant Schulthess acquiring French market leader Armstrong France. It advised Armstrong France Holdings Ltd on the sale of its wholly-owned French subsidiary, Armstrong France SAS, to Swiss-based Schulthess Maschinen AG.

A procurement and social value workshop helped employers to strengthen bids and better understand what buyers look for when awarding contracts. The session, delivered by the business support team at Telford and Wrekin Council in partnership with Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, was designed to support local businesses in becoming tender-ready and understand the role of social value in procurement.

A Shropshire pet photographer has gained national recognition from two respected photography institutions. Carole Ann "Caz" Chambers, of Chambers Photographic in Market Drayton, creates fine art portraits of dogs and horses. Her equine portrait 'Noble Companion' was shortlisted at the British Photography Awards, and she received multiple accolades in the annual Country and Equine Photographer of the Year awards.

Severn Trent is deploying 'eyes in the sky' and using cutting-edge satellite technology to track extreme weather and keep wastewater systems running smoothly. In a UK first, the water company is working with ICEYE, to revolutionise how flooding and wastewater issues are managed – using advanced Synthetic Aperture Radar satellites giving them a bird's eye view of flood risks, even during cloudy conditions.



Market Drayton photographer Caz Chambers



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Big day for a small business

Jeevan Punj, founder of Elite Hampers in Telford, joined a special reception at the House of Lords as part of the Small Business Saturday campaign.

The event in Westminster spotlighted the SmallBiz100 – a line-up of top performing small businesses from all over the country.

Elite Hampers was featured in recognition of its entrepreneurial journey, which has seen the business grow year on year, become an award winner and provide a gifting service that has given them all five-star reviews.

Jeevan said: "I am very proud of how Elite Hampers is growing. The celebration at the House of Lords was a surreal experience and gave me the opportunity to meet the Chancellor Rachel Reeves."

"I am very grateful to be named as one of the hundred inspiring UK businesses and was super thrilled to be a part of such an amazing small business community."



Jeevan Punj and her husband at the House of Lords as part of Small Business Saturday

National award for innovation



Celebrations for the Hospital Direct team

Hospital Direct – the manufacturing business based in Clun – has won a top national award.

The company was recognised for its ground-breaking patient positioning technology at the Occupational Therapy Show, held at the NEC in Birmingham.

The south Shropshire company, which specialises in the manufacture and distribution of patient-handling equipment, took home the Best Innovative Product Award.

It recognised the company's Morphematic system – an automated, market-leading solution for pressure care and patient repositioning designed by a Belgian neurosurgeon.

As the sole UK distributor, Hospital Direct has introduced the Morphematic to healthcare providers across the country, where it is already gaining significant traction among occupational therapists, manual handling specialists and carers alike.

Head of sales and marketing Bruce Gutteridge said: "We are immensely

proud to be leading the way in next-generation pressure care technologies. Pressure care is a significant challenge in long-term care and innovations like this are essential if we are to deliver safer, more dignified and more effective care across all settings."

The company said pressure care was becoming an increasingly urgent priority in both acute and community settings.

Rising awareness, driven by campaigns such as the Society of Tissue Viability's #StopThePressure, has focused national attention on the prevention and treatment of pressure ulcers and other complex skin-related conditions.

It said the Morphematic system was playing a critical role in transforming everyday practice, helping healthcare professionals to protect patients from avoidable harm while improving workflow for carers.

Founded 28 years ago, Hospital Direct works closely with healthcare professionals and care providers to develop solutions that improve safety, ease and dignity in patient care.

Flying high with five-year deal

Aviation ramp specialist Aviramp has signed a five-year deal with one of the world's largest and most influential ground handling companies.

The Telford-based company completed the deal with Dubai National Air Travel Agency at the Dubai Airshow, where it demonstrated one of its pioneering solar-powered ramps in partnership with the firm.

The procurement contract means that dnata bases anywhere in the world can now order direct from Aviramp without the need for a tender process.

Dubai National Air Travel Agency operates in more than 30 countries across six continents and handled more than 794,000 aircraft turnarounds and 3.1million tonnes of cargo in the last financial year.

Aviramp head of global sales Adam Corfield said the deal was a major breakthrough for the company, which now has more than 900 of its groundbreaking step-free, non-slip ramps in use around the world.

"As part of the deal, we have agreed an annual pricing structure for all our models and optional extras so that dnata has absolute confidence in costs for the five years of the contract.

"It offers them stability and clarity while allowing us to establish a long-lasting relationship with them for sales. It's yet another significant breakthrough for us as a company, on the back of a record performance over the past 18 months."

Adam and Aviramp chief executive Graham Corfield were invited to the Dubai Airshow to showcase an Aviramp Continental solar-powered ramp alongside a flydubai Boeing 737-800.

Graham said: "We have established a fantastic partnership with dnata and it was a pleasure to be able to join them at the show, where our ramp attracted a huge amount of interest.

"This new contract is further proof that our pioneering ramps – which offer safe and dignified boarding and disembarking for all passengers as well as improved turnaround times for operators – are an important part of improving both passenger experience and efficiency."

Aviramp was this year named in the Sunday Times 100 – the prestigious ranking of Britain's fastest-growing private companies. It is a current holder of the Queen's Award for International Trade and posted record profits in 2024.



Aviramp chief executive Graham Corfield and Robert Powell from Dubai National Air Travel Agency

Aviramp boarding ramps and bridges are used when an aircraft is parked on a remote stand and offer a safe, dignified alternative to stairs and separate ambulifts for wheelchair users and those passengers with reduced mobility.

The low-angled ramps are fitted with a unique non-slip surface to improve safety for all passengers and help improve turnaround times and efficiency for airlines, airports and ground handlers.

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The 2025 awards had a Greatest Showman theme



Colourful celebrations at the after-show party last year

All to be unveiled at awards launch night

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce will be unveiling plans for its 2026 business awards at a launch night in Shrewsbury on January 22.

The competition will be officially launched at an evening reception at Hencote vineyard and restaurant in Shrewsbury, starting at 5.30pm.

Tickets for the launch event are free, and available on a first come, first served basis through the events page of the Chamber's website.

Shropshire Chamber chief executive Ruth Ross said: "Ever since the awards were launched in 2001, they have been a highlight of the local business calendar, and we can't wait to share our exciting plans for the 2026 celebrations."

The launch event will give businesses a first opportunity to find out about available categories for this year - with many favourite awards returning, and some new ones being introduced too.

The Chamber's team will also be outlining the remaining sponsorship opportunities, with packages on offer for every budget. Entries for this year's competition will be officially opened following the launch event.

Kelly Riedel, the Chamber's head of member success, said: "For sponsors and for finalists, the awards night provides an incredible chance to showcase their brands in front of up to 700 people."

"We can't wait to show people what we



McPhillips celebrating their Company of the Year title

have got lined up this year, building on the incredible success of our 25th anniversary celebrations this summer. It's going to be another spectacular night."

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

Winners will be crowned once again at Telford's International Centre, which has been home to the event since 2003. The 2026 awards

night will take place on Friday June 19. The 25th anniversary celebration last summer was one of the most successful in the event's history. Telford-based construction company McPhillips was crowned Company of the Year, and the John Clayton Award for outstanding contribution to the local economy went to Steven Owen of Pave Aways.

A special 'Champion of Champions' award to mark the event's silver anniversary went to Oswestry-based Aico, a three-time company of the year.

Out with the old, in with the new

Ishbel Lapper



Let's start with the big news. I'm changing name – HR Solutions Shropshire is now officially Wright HR.

Why the change? Last year we became a limited company – a milestone that opens the door to future growth. Bringing our trading name into line with the limited company name is a natural next step. It gives us a sharper identity, a refreshed brand and the chance to update our website at the same time.

For those who don't know, Wright is my maiden name, so this new identity feels far more personal and rooted in who I am and my vision for the future.

What does this mean for clients? Very little will change in terms of service. I'll continue to deliver the no-nonsense, common-sense HR and employment advice that has been my hallmark throughout my career – advice that has earned national awards and recognition.

But I'll also have an extra pair of hands helping me out. We've recently welcomed a new office manager, Leanne Taylor, to support our continued growth.

Leanne has already hit the ground running. I've worked with her before and know just how good she is. With extensive experience in conveyancing, hospitality, education and insurance, she's taken to the role like a duck to water.

We've already attended several networking events together, including the annual CIPD conference in Manchester, and it's been a pleasure introducing her to clients and colleagues.

Of course, the big topic of conversation at the conference was the huge changes employers will be facing this year as parts of the Employment Rights Bill come into effect.

The Government is still consulting on some issues – including its retreat on day-one unfair dismissal rights which now look set to be subject to a six-month probation period – but many reforms are already scheduled.

Changes coming into effect in April include:

- Reforms to Statutory Sick Pay (including removal of the lower earnings limit)
- Day-one rights to paternity and unpaid parental leave are expected to come into force



There are so many rule changes for bosses to keep on top of in 2026

- Simplification of trade union recognition and the establishment of the new Fair Work Agency
- The maximum 'protective award' for failure to consult in collective redundancy is expected to double from 90 days' pay to 180 days' pay
- Sexual harassment is expected to become a 'qualifying disclosure' under whistleblowing law
- Employers are expected to have to create action plans around menopause and gender pay gaps. These are likely to be voluntary from April 2026 but could become mandatory until 2027

And more changes due in October 2026 include:

- Fire-and-rehire becomes automatically unfair
- Tribunal claim limits extend from three to six months
- Trade union members' rights of access expand
- Employers face a new duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent workplace sexual harassment, including by third parties

That's a lot of change to prepare for, so if you haven't started planning, don't leave it any longer.

Finally... Thank you for your wonderful support throughout the last 12 months. Without you trusting me to look after your HR over the last few years I wouldn't be in the position I am now, and what started out as a little business wouldn't be growing bigger each and every year.

With that in mind, here's to a prosperous, happy and successful 2026 for us all.

Ishbel Lapper runs Telford-based Wright HR, formerly HR Solutions Shropshire

Growth hub has new manager

The Shropshire Growth Hub is entering a new phase this year, with a new-look leadership team.

Ruth Westwood has taken over as the manager of the programme, following the retirement of Emma Chapman who held the post for seven years.

Since its launch, the Growth Hub has delivered nearly 19,000 business interventions, supported more than 1,200 start-ups, and helped businesses secure funding, adopt new technology, and develop skilled workforces.

Over the past seven years it has invested £1,437,901 of funding provided by government into Shropshire's business community, providing grants, one-to-one support sessions, advice and guidance, workshops, training, webinars and conferences.

In 2024 alone, the Hub helped 1,420 businesses, launched 195 new ventures, and hosted 123 events for over 2,500 delegates.

Emma Chapman said: "Leading the Growth Hub has been an incredible experience. I've worked with so many inspiring business owners and advisors and seen first-hand how the Hub makes a real difference. I'm proud of what we've achieved together."

Ruth Westwood joined Invest in Shropshire in 2022 with a focus on supporting large companies.

She said: "I'm excited to build on the strong foundations that have been created. The Growth Hub is here to help businesses in Shropshire start, grow and thrive and I can't wait to continue that work."

Ruth Martin, director of Martin & Jones Marketing in Oswestry, benefitted initially from support from the Growth Hub and is now a business advisor and an advocate for the help it provides.



Emma Chapman, former Growth Hub manager



Ruth Westwood is excited to take on the role

She said: "Emma Chapman was the first person I met as I started our entrepreneurial journey. I can honestly say we wouldn't have become the growing business we are without her and the Shropshire Growth Hub's support and guidance over the last seven years."

Part of Invest in Shropshire at Shropshire Council, the Shropshire Growth Hub provides information and support for businesses in the Shropshire Council local authority area.

It runs an extensive yearly calendar of free events and webinars and offers advice on grants, loans, and assistance for companies of any size or sector, from start-ups to established enterprises.

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Costs still outpacing turnover for 'worried' Shropshire businesses

Costs are still outpacing turnover growth for Shropshire businesses, prompting many employers to shed staff or scale back on recruitment.

This was one of the headline findings from the latest quarterly economic survey carried out by Shropshire Chamber of Commerce.



The survey – which feeds results into national policy-makers – collected the majority of its feedback immediately before Chancellor Rachel Reeves' latest budget.

Many businesses said they were still feeling the effects of her 2024 announcements, which piled on extra staffing costs – and said wage demands were showing no sign of easing.

One employer from the manufacturing sector said: "Business owners are workers too, and probably work more hours for a lower hourly rate than most. I may consider selling up or moving the company abroad."

Another from the retail and wholesale sector said: "In the last two months two of our staff have resigned. We are looking to reduce further and may have to consider compulsory redundancy."

And a logistics company boss said: "We tried to take on an apprentice, but this was challenging due to the lack of productivity and the minimum wage we had to pay."

Speculation and uncertainty in the run-up to this year's budget was cited by several employers as having damaged confidence, making customers more wary of spending and reluctant to plan too far into the future.

Only a quarter of companies which took part in the latest survey said they had seen a rise in sales over the past quarter, and more than 80% said future order levels had fallen.

Fewer than 10% of employers said they expected to increase staff numbers in coming months – one of the lowest levels since the Shropshire Chamber surveys began.

When questioned about 'fear factors' impacting their day-to-day operations, there was a 13% rise in those who quoted taxation, and an 11% jump in those who pointed to inflation.

Only 39% of Shropshire businesses think their turnover will improve over the next year – although this is still lower than pre-Covid levels.

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's Quarterly Economic Survey is open to any business of any size in Shropshire or Telford & Wrekin.

Companies do not need to be a member of Shropshire Chamber

Budget Gloom...

Government leaks bring fear to businesses...

- The 2024 budget piled on staffing cost pressures
- Business costs still outpacing turnover
- Wage demands show no sign of easing
- Slow payments to businesses growing

The gloom has its roots in the 2024 budget. The sequel did little to improve matters.



Businesses are under pressure in many ways, not least of all increasing bad debts

to take part, and feedback is left anonymously to allow companies to speak frankly and honestly. Shropshire's results are fed into the national survey by the British Chambers of Commerce, which is used by the Bank of England and other relevant bodies and economists to gain an understanding of the state of business.

Rosie Beswick, Shropshire Chamber's policy analyst, said: "It is clear from these latest results that there remains a great deal of uncertainty and worry across many sectors of the county's business community."

"Staffing costs remain a growing burden, and many employers are cutting back on recruitment. And many backdoor taxes are continuing to sneak in. Slow payments to businesses also appear to have become a growing issue."

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has won the contract to lead the Government's Local Skills Improvement Plan research across the Marches area for another three years.

The project aims to empower local leaders, employers, colleges, independent training providers, and universities to transform skills training – driving national economic renewal from the ground up.

Rosie said: "Getting the right skills for our local employers is critical to ensure a healthy economic future for our region. Capturing the employer's voice locally is vital to ensure this can happen."

Bridging the gap that leads to work

Shropshire company of the year McPhillips has thrown its weight behind a scheme to support local schools and colleges to produce the workforce of the future.

The Telford-based construction firm has become a Marches Career Hub Cornerstone Employer – helping bridge the gap between education and the workplace.

Cornerstone Employers work with the careers hub to ensure all young people in the area have the opportunities they need to be prepared and inspired for the world of work.

Managing director Paul Inions said: "There is a real shortage of skills and new talent in the construction industry so it is crucial we do all we can to encourage young people into the industry and build a pipeline of talent for the future."

"We pride ourselves on being rooted in our local community and this programme is an excellent way of helping build a bright future for all our youngsters and growing our economy."

As part of its commitment, McPhillips' new social value co-ordinator Emily Myatt visited Idsall School in Shifnal to give a construction talk to around 200 year 9 students. She was also joined by apprentice Ollie Fudge.

"I cannot think of a better way to build for the future than to give youngsters a real insight into the construction industry and show them some of the fantastic careers available within it," said Paul.

Andriane Usherwood-Brown, strategic lead for the Marches Careers Hub, welcomed McPhillips to the hub's Cornerstone Employers.



McPhillips apprentice Ollie Fudge, Idsall School's head of construction Graham Northall, McPhillips social value co-ordinator Emily Myatt and McPhillips procurement manager Roger Cox

"McPhillips has a strong track record over many years of training and developing young people, as well as being an award-winning local employer, and they will be a brilliant addition to our team. I look forward to seeing the difference their involvement makes to youngsters throughout the Marches."

McPhillips is the reigning Shropshire Business of the Year. It directly employs 240 people and has delivered more than 140 projects as principal contractor with a value of £300 million in the last five years from its Hortonwood headquarters.

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Logistics Upside Down Call Us



At the Shropshire Chamber Business Awards, from left, Edwin Derry, Guy Black, Milissa Chesters, Rhys Morgan and Cliff Sedgley

Futureproofing Industry

It's been one of the most testing years in recent memory for UK manufacturing. Make UK's latest outlook reports falling output, weaker order books, and the sharpest drop in business confidence since the pandemic, with many firms delaying investment and freezing recruitment.

Shropshire businesses feel this first-hand. Energy costs remain unpredictable, supply chains are fragile and there is increasing pressure to deliver on 2030 and 2050 net zero commitments... while still hitting quarterly numbers.

Yet behind the headlines, a different story is emerging. Those who continue to invest in modern automation, sustainable energy management and resilient digital infrastructure are starting to pull ahead.

From its headquarters in Telford, iconsys sits squarely in that space, helping manufacturers and infrastructure operators to futureproof their operations rather than simply ride out the storm.

The company is a UK-owned provider of industrial power, control and automation solutions, working with manufacturers, original equipment manufacturers and engineering, procurement and construction companies for the whole lifecycle of their industrial assets.

It operates across many industrial sectors such as metals, pulp and paper, FMCG, construction materials, marine and ports, aerospace & defence, rubber & plastics, energy transition and transportation infrastructure.

Over the past year, iconsys has won the Excellence in Engineering and Manufacturing category at the Shropshire Chamber Business Awards, a strong endorsement of the capability that exists in Telford, delivering projects throughout the UK and globally.

The company's iConvert microgrid solution, for optimal energy management and optimisation, was recognised as runner-up



The iconsys headquarters at Stafford Park



Supporting manufacturers with whole-site safety assessments is a key part of the company's role

for Innovation at the Make UK Manufacturing Awards for the Midlands and the East.

And it was listed by Best Companies 2025 among the Top 20 UK Technology Companies to Work For, and the Top 75 UK Small Companies to Work For, reflecting a focus on culture, development and staff wellbeing.

Equally important, the company says, is its investment in the next generation of engineers.

It works closely with Telford College and Shrewsbury College, supporting apprentices and T-Level students with workplace experience, mentoring and real project exposure.

"Young people in Shropshire do not need to leave the county to build high quality engineering careers," said the company's head of people and culture Milissa Chesters.



Creating industrial power, control and automation solutions

Five Big Challenges

Across Shropshire and the rest of the UK, iconsys says conversations with senior managers and directors currently tend to revolve around five recurring operational challenges:

Machine safety

Legislation and standards continue to evolve, but many manufacturing plants still rely on legacy machinery and safety systems. The risk is not only to people, but also to reputation and uptime if there is a serious incident. Supporting manufacturers with whole-site safety assessments, functional safety design and turnkey upgrades, road mapped to futureproof operations, is part of the iconsys offer, to bring process lines up to modern standards in a planned, phased way rather than through emergency fixes.

Obsolescence of industrial assets

Industrial equipment such as drives, PLCs, HMIs and safety systems reach end of life. Spares disappear. Key engineers retire.

Cyber security risks abound. Many businesses are now heavily exposed to obsolescence risk without a clear plan. In sectors such as pulp and paper and FMCG, this often means modernising major lines while keeping production running and safeguarding margins.

Sustainability and energy management

Energy costs and carbon emissions are now board-level issues. Manufacturers are being asked to reduce emissions, manage tariffs and demonstrate credible pathways to net zero. The focus at iconsys is on designing systems that integrate grid power, on-site renewables, battery storage and intelligent control. Containerised power and microgrid solutions are a growing part of this, giving customers more control over when and how they use energy and reducing dependence on the Grid.

Digitalisation

Many factories still operate with islands of automation, limited data, and little integration with business systems. Decisions are made on incomplete or delayed information. By joining up plant-floor data with supervisory and enterprise systems, iconsys aims to help businesses to gain real-time visibility of performance, downtime, quality and energy use. The goal is not "technology for its own sake", it says, but better decision-making and more stable, predictable operations.

Cyber security

As operations become more connected, cyber risk moves from the IT department into the plant room. A successful attack on control systems can stop production, damage equipment and breach safety limits.



Recognition at the Make UK Manufacturing Awards

"Our OT cyber and resilience services help clients understand what assets they have, how they are connected, who has access and how quickly systems could be restored," said managing director Nick Darrall. "Using frameworks aligned with recognised standards, we develop practical plans for segmentation, hardening and recovery that sit alongside safety and obsolescence programmes."

At CEMEX's Shoreham Wharf in West Sussex, the iConvert Smart Shore Power System is allowing allows vessels to plug into clean on-shore power rather than running diesel generators while berthed.

Housed in containerised units, it manages power from the local network, solar PV and battery storage, supplying ships and site loads in the most efficient way. The benefits are clear: lower emissions, better air quality, more predictable energy costs and improved resilience.

This system is not just for shore power; iconsys is dealing with enquiries from all key industrial sectors to allow for optimal energy management and transitioning to net zero. The company outlined some of these developments at a meeting of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's sustainability partnership at Lilleshall towards the end of last year.

For offshore and heavy industrial applications, iconsys also produces containerised power and control cabins that are built and tested at the Telford facility before being shipped to site – or onto a vessel.

This modular approach reduces on-site disruption, shortens installation windows and makes it easier to replicate successful designs across multiple projects, whether in marine, metals or infrastructure environments.

Looking ahead, the company is also designing and delivering power and control systems for a major UK hydrogen production facility, alongside work on a hydrogen mobility corridor.

While details are confidential, iconsys says the common thread is the need for reliable, safe and flexible control of new energy technologies.

"For our region, it demonstrates that a Telford-based business is helping to deliver some of the most advanced low-carbon projects in the country," Nick Darrall says

Despite the difficulties of 2025, iconsys describes itself as cautiously optimistic about 2026 and beyond.

It expects three areas to see sustained investment:

- Transportation infrastructure and fleet operations: Zero-emission mandates, changing freight patterns and public investment in cleaner transport are driving demand for electrified depots, rail-linked



Apprentice Jack Evans has been promoted to junior electrical test technician

terminals, distribution hubs and roadside charging infrastructure. "While Shropshire is far from the coast, many local manufacturers are already in – or could enter – the national supply chains that support these projects through equipment, skids, control systems and modular power solutions," said Nick.

- Heavy industry and metals decarbonisation: Steel and wider metals remain central to net zero plans, but many assets are ageing and energy-intensive. There is strong potential for phased automation, drive and furnace upgrades, energy optimisation and integration of low-carbon technologies. "Our experience in metals plants gives us a solid platform to help customers cut emissions while improving productivity – and to open up opportunities for Shropshire firms that design, build or support this type of equipment."

- Ageing assets across general manufacturing: Many factories, regardless of sector, are still running with legacy drives, PLCs, safety systems and networks that are increasingly hard to support. The pressure to maintain output with minimal downtime often delays necessary upgrades. Here, the focus is on carefully planned migrations of control and drive systems, modern safety solutions, better data visibility and stronger OT cyber resilience, delivered while lines remain operational. Nick said: "This is as relevant to mid-sized manufacturers in Shropshire as it is to the largest national players."

He adds: "For Shropshire managers and business leaders, the message is simple. 2025 has been tough, and uncertainty will not disappear overnight. But waiting for perfect conditions is itself a risk.

"By investing selectively in the right automation, power and control foundations now, you can protect your people and assets, stabilise energy use and costs, extend the life of critical equipment, and prepare your operations for net zero and a more digital, connected future.

"From our Technology Hub in Telford, iconsys is working with manufacturers, OEMs and EPCs across the UK to make that happen. If you are reviewing your 2026 plans and recognise these challenges in your own operations, now is the time to start the conversation."



Morris Property has marked the topping out of two projects at Concord College near Shrewsbury. The team is building a new 60-bed boarding residence and sports hall at the Acton Burnell site. The traditional ceremony, which signifies that the building's structure has reached its highest point, was attended by key members of the client team from Concord College, along with project associates. Principal Michael Truss said: "The new facilities are taking shape impressively, and we look forward to welcoming students into the new developments in the next academic year."

Solar farm heading to foot of The Wrekin

Power producer Enviromena has secured construction financing from Close Brothers' Energy team to support the delivery of the controversial Steeraway Solar Farm in Shropshire.

The agreement will enable construction to begin on the site at the foot of The Wrekin, with a view to it being connected to the National Grid before the end of the year.

Once operational, Steeraway will generate enough clean electricity to power more than 15,000 homes each year and avoid over 8,000 tonnes of carbon emissions annually.

As part of the approved plans, the solar farm will also deliver environmental enhancements including biodiversity improvements, sensitive landscape planting and the continuation of agricultural grazing, ensuring the project integrates with and supports the surrounding countryside.

Enviromena chief executive Chris Marsh said: "Achieving financial close on Steeraway marks another significant step in our mission to expand our UK solar portfolio and accelerate the transition to a low-carbon energy system."

"Our continued collaboration with Close Brothers' Energy team allows us to bring forward high quality, strategically important renewable projects that deliver both environmental and community benefits."

Richie Kidd, head of deal execution for the energy team at Close Brothers, said: "Partnering once again with Enviromena on the Steeraway Solar Farm reinforces our commitment to supporting the deployment of clean energy infrastructure across the UK."

The 30-megawatt development has been the subject of a bitter planning row over the past couple of years.

It was given the go-ahead by a planning inspector in 2023 after Telford & Wrekin Council originally rejected it. Objectors claimed the fields and woodlands should be protected as one of the last remaining green spaces locally.



Midlands Air Ambulance Charity welcomed supporters, crew members, and former patients to a 'Celebration of Life' event, at its Cosford airbase and headquarters. The ceremony honoured the memories of loved ones and celebrated the lives saved by the charity's critical care teams.



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Gareth Jones celebrates his award

Jennifer Hughes of Transicon

National recognition

Shropshire business leaders have been recognised among the country's leading manufacturing figures.

Jennifer Hughes of Transicon, Chris Greenough of CEL Sheetmetal, Gareth Jones of In-Comm Training and James Worthington of MyWorkwear are included in Britain's Great 100 Manufacturing Leaders list.

Richard Homden of SDE Technology, and Andrew Lee of Shrewsbury College are also on the roll of honour, alongside two of the team from Wrekin Sheetmetal – Simon Orpe and Matthew Halliwell

Launched by the Made in Group, the Great 100 recognises individuals who demonstrate exceptional leadership and commitment to strengthening British industry.

Jason Pitt, chief executive of Made in Group, said: "We created the Great 100 to shine a national spotlight on the people who keep our

incredible manufacturing sector moving. These awards celebrate those who are Backing Britain every day through hard work, collaboration and a commitment to industry excellence.

"These 100 unsung heroes are helping to build stronger, more resilient businesses, supporting communities and inspiring others. Through the Great 100, we want their stories to be heard across the country so everyone can understand the vital role they play."

Jennifer said: "We're passionate about developing the next generation of engineers and creating sustainable innovative solutions that help our clients across sectors from automotive manufacturing to food and drink processing."

Jennifer, who sits on the Industry Advisory Board of Women in Manufacturing UK, added that the company would continue to focus on skills and workforce development, including recruitment into its active apprenticeship scheme.

"We're looking to build the next generation of engineers so we will be actively looking to further develop our apprenticeship programme, as well as working with more schools across the borough to champion the importance of STEM skills."

The Great 100 cohort includes business owners and directors, team leaders, apprentices, educators and industry ambassadors – reflecting the full spectrum of people driving progress.

The awards celebration took place at the Century Club in Soho, following Made in Group's Westminster Parliamentary Reception, hosted by Lord Whitby of Harborne, chairman of Made in Group.

At the reception, members and supporters called on the Government to support British manufacturers with fairer procurement policies and a national 'Buy British' approach, giving domestic businesses meaningful opportunities to compete for public contracts.



You just can't beat good old fashioned customer service

Anton Gunter



Howzit and welcome to 2026 – a year in which Global Freight Services Ltd will be turning 30. The world is still at war... and for the same reasons as previous years, the logistics industry continues to be challenged.

The past year has seen us here at Global Freight Services cement relationships with agents in Mexico, the USA, Canada, Australia, China, Qatar, South Africa and Nigeria. We actively shipped to around 130 countries worldwide and have continued to grow our air and rail freight offering.

The challenges of war, the closing of the Suez Canal to mainstream freight, and Uncle Donald's tariffs have all added up to a lot of change in volumes, as well as transport methods, and once again our clients have reaped the rewards of our hunger and desire to take their products not only local, but national and global.

I often get asked: "What is a freight forwarder? Why would we need a freight forwarder?"

Well, we are essentially a conduit between transport suppliers and customers; we are the knowledge portal for when customers want to pick our brains – and we are there to support you if something goes wrong.

But best of all, we are at the end of a phone, or indeed a car journey away, to assist companies with all of their logistical requirements.

We have been proudly located in Shropshire for all of our 30 years and have helped countless companies on their journey. We have helped a few companies expand through international trade and have supported other companies to start their expansion into international trade.

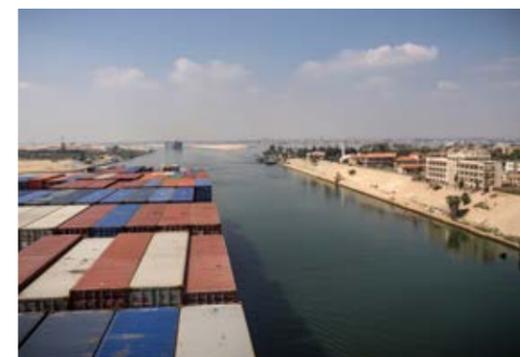
Brexit provided a challenge for businesses, and through all of it, Global Freight Services has continued to keep the offering to Shropshire-based business the same. You manufacture, and we will continue to provide logistical support.

Leaving the customs union meant clients were left in the dark, despite many membership organisations trying their best to cash in and try to provide support... only to stop providing said local support when the sexiness of Brexit dimmed.

Both the FSB and the Shropshire Chamber came up with various offerings which have since ceased, yet here we are, Global Freight Services, still ensuring freight continues to move smoothly and seamlessly.

In all my time as a freight forwarder we have always had challenges. They've been the sort of challenges which very often send the international trade market to seek cover behind a sofa, only to be shielded by sound advice and good communication.

Global Freight Services Ltd has always



The closing of the Suez Canal caused major disruption to freight movement

prided itself on making sure the customer always knows what's happening, and is always aware of potential delays and changes to deliveries.

We know we compete with big freight forwarding companies that have the staff numbers and resources that would make our eyes water, yet we also know that we still compete with them... because old fashioned customer service is still at the very core of who we are.

So, my challenge to Shropshire-based businesses in 2026 is simple.

Local is always touted as being better, easier to access and easier to contact. So if you already do international trade, if you are thinking of international trade, you've had international enquiries but are unsure of what to do next, or if your current supplier has left the area and you no longer have a local representative to call – please don't worry. Simply call us at Global Freight Services Ltd.

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



4-11



11-16



16-18

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LOVE THE JOURNEY





Purpose, Process, People and Performance: Unblocking barriers to change

Former Shropshire Council chief executive ANDY BEGLEY reflects on the challenges facing our local authorities – and what they could potentially learn from the private sector

I've spent three decades holding senior roles in public and private sector organisations, and one common factor has become painfully clear: we're all too often guilty of confusing 'activity' with 'progress'.

In the public sector, it often defaults to rearranging structures rather than rethinking purpose. Organisational charts change, but outcomes don't. It's the illusion of progress; busy work dressed up as transformation.

I've just completed a five-year stint as chief executive of Shropshire Council, guiding the authority through some incredibly challenging post-Covid times.

Leading an organisation of this size and complexity has been difficult – but also a huge privilege. I'm very proud of what we achieved together.

I can tell you from first-hand experience that barriers to change are rarely due to a lack of ideas. They're down to execution. Good intentions stall when systems creak, when staff feel disconnected, when outcomes aren't measured, or when the bigger "why?" is forgotten.

That's why I passionately believe these four pillars – Purpose, Process, People, and Performance – are the foundations for unblocking barriers to change.

Private firms pivot fast because their survival depends on it. Councils, bound by legacy systems and accountability frameworks (not to mention blunt regulatory tools that can sometimes distort or distract the very systems they claim to improve) must learn to move with

similar agility. I've seen countless restructures announced with fanfare. New directorates are created, job titles are shuffled, and reporting lines redrawn.

For a few months, there's a buzz of energy, but once the dust settles, the same challenges remain: underfunded services, overstretched staff, and outcomes that barely shift. At least from the outside looking in.

Contrast this with the private sector. Businesses restructure too, but the driver is usually sharper: profit, efficiency, or market survival. If a retailer reorganises its supply chain, it's because customers are walking away. If a tech firm flattens its hierarchy, it's to speed up innovation.

The stakes are immediate and measurable. A restructure that doesn't deliver results is quickly abandoned, because shareholders and customers won't tolerate the illusion of progress.

In the private sector, the market punishes failure more swiftly than the ballot box or any ministerial reshuffle ever does.

But there is one crucial piece of common ground here. Leaders in any sector must first define why their organisation exists today – not the inherited mission from decades past. Only then can process and performance align meaningfully.

Change fails when we forget that systems are human. Empowerment, clarity, and trust are the real accelerators of transformation.

PURPOSE is the compass. Without a clear sense of why change is happening, momentum quickly fades. Purpose connects the day to day grind to a bigger vision: improving lives, serving communities, creating value. It's the antidote to cynicism. When people understand the purpose, they see beyond the disruption

and recognise the worth of transformation. Purpose inspires resilience, reminding everyone that change is not just about survival but about progress.

PROCESS is the foundation. Without clear, streamlined processes, even the best strategies will collapse under the weight of bureaucracy. Too often, change initiatives drown in complexity: endless approvals, duplicated tasks, or outdated systems. By simplifying workflows, clarifying responsibilities, and embedding agility, organisations create the conditions for change to flow. Process isn't about rigid rules; it's about building pathways that make transformation possible.

PEOPLE are the heartbeat of change. No restructure, technology, or policy will succeed if the workforce isn't engaged. I've seen projects fail because leaders treated staff as obstacles rather than allies. When people are empowered, trained, and trusted, they become champions of change. Listening to their insights, valuing their contributions, and supporting their growth ensures that change isn't imposed – it's co-created. Culture shifts when individuals feel ownership.

PERFORMANCE provides the feedback loop. Change without some degree of measurement is blind. Organisations need to know whether new approaches are delivering results, not just activity. Performance metrics should be meaningful, not box ticking exercises. They should track outcomes that matter – customer satisfaction, community impact, efficiency gains – rather than vanity statistics. When performance is measured honestly, it highlights what's working and what needs adjustment, keeping change on course.

Process clears the path, people drive the journey, performance keeps the wheels on

track, and purpose ensures the destination is worth reaching.

A brilliant strategy can be undone by clunky processes. A slick system can be sabotaged by disengaged staff. Strong performance metrics mean nothing if they're disconnected from purpose.

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

There are only so many conferences, masterclasses, speeches, and presentations you can attend before you start to question some of the fundamental messages, or feel they're miring you in a web of contradictions.

Corporate leaders often chase fashionable management trends – matrix structures, agile squads, endless rebranding exercises. But the difference is accountability. If the new model doesn't improve the bottom line, it'll be exposed quickly.

In the public sector, by contrast, the feedback loop is slower and fuzzier. Outcomes like social value, educational attainment, or community wellbeing are harder to measure, and political cycles which can pivot overnight on an election result often prioritise visibility over impact.

A politician can claim success by pointing to a new structure, even if the lived experience of citizens remains unchanged.

Working across both these worlds has taught me that purpose is the missing ingredient in many public sector reforms. Too often, the question asked is "How should we organise ourselves?" rather than "What are we here to achieve?"

The former leads to endless tinkering with structures; the latter forces a deeper



Former Shropshire Council chief executive Andy Begley

conversation about mission, values, and outcomes.

When I've seen public bodies genuinely rethink purpose and bravely break a generations-old mould, the results have been transformative. But those examples are all too rare.

During my time in adult social care, I flipped the perception of the service from one which was seen as a black hole of money and resource that just eats up and consumes everything you throw at it.

Instead, I invited people to think about it in a different way, as one of the biggest drivers of the local economy because of the number of people it employs, and its GVA. When you think of it that way, it starts to take on a very different image.

Because of an ageing population, we were seeing demand for social care services outstripping what the market could supply.

Focusing on the management of supply and

demand, we began to look at how our input – the decisions we make – had a wider economic impact, positively affecting more than the council's core responsibility to meet the health and social care needs of our communities.

This thinking empowered us to shape the market through smarter commissioning, and closer partnership with the likes of NHS Digital, the Local Government Association, ADASS, and various other partners.

Private employers tend to keep purpose front and centre: serving customers, growing revenue, staying competitive. Public employers could learn from that discipline, not by mimicking profit motives but by clarifying the social outcomes they exist to deliver.

Agility isn't optional these days, it's survival. When markets shift, competitors innovate, or customers demand something new, businesses pivot fast.

Decisions are made quickly, structures flex, and strategies evolve because the cost of standing still is existential. If you don't adapt, you lose revenue, market share, and ultimately your relevance.

In councils and public bodies, change is slower, more cautious, and often tangled in legacy systems and accountability frameworks. I've sat in many meetings where the urgency was palpable; staff knew the community needed something different, faster, better, but the machinery of governance slowed everything down.

Procurement rules, statutory obligations, and political oversight all added layers of complexity. Even when the will to change was strong, the process itself became the barrier.

That doesn't mean councils lack ambition or creativity. I've seen some of the most inspiring ideas emerge from public sector teams; initiatives rooted in fairness, inclusion, and long term social value.

The challenge is translating those ideas into action at pace. Where a private firm might trial a new service in weeks, a council could take months just to clear the approvals. By the time the change lands, the context has often shifted again.

The irony, I believe, is that both sectors could learn from each other. Private firms excel at speed, but sometimes at the expense of deeper purpose and a connected workforce.

Councils must hold tight to their ethos of public service, accountability, and equity while at the same time rethinking their purpose.

In business, speed is often celebrated, but without checks and balances, it can lead to short termism or ethical blind spots. Councils remind us that change should serve people, not just profit. The trick is finding the balance: agility with integrity, speed with social value.

Targets should always illuminate, not intimidate. Councils must shift from compliance reporting to insight-driven performance learning.

The next evolution of local government isn't service delivery... it's co-creation. Citizens should not be viewed simply as customers, but as collaborators who can help to shape our civic purpose.

● Andy Begley tries to cut through the noise of traditional success and leadership advice in his new book, 'I Didn't Row the Atlantic #sowhat', available to order on Amazon.



A new home in Wellington for Cats Protection Telford & District



Martin Vickers, founder of Halfpenny Green Wine Estate

New homes and partnerships

Cats Protection Telford & District has moved into a new home in Wellington. Telford & Wrekin Council has worked closely with the charity to secure a town centre space at Wellington Market. Volunteers were concerned they may have to close for good due to the regeneration of the market but they have now moved into a new location previously held by Spirit of Bulgaria in the Market Piazza.

Goldstone Hall Country House Hotel near Market Drayton has been shortlisted in the Small Serviced Accommodation Provider of the Year category at the West Midlands Tourism Awards 2026. This follows their recent success taking Gold in 2025 and Silver in 2024. The awards celebrate excellence across the region's vibrant tourism and hospitality sector, recognising over 40 leading visitor-facing businesses across 14 categories.

A further legal notice has been issued to the owners of the Royal Victoria Hotel in Newport after they repeatedly failed to take action to protect the Grade II Listed building. Since private development work stalled in 2020, Telford & Wrekin Council has taken legal action against owners Town Centre Properties several times to prevent further deterioration. The council is pursuing a compulsory purchase through legal channels to secure its future.

Halfpenny Green Wine Estate near Bridgnorth has unveiled a limited edition commemorative red wine in honour of its late founder, Martin Charles Vickers. The MCV Reserve, taken from the 2022 harvest of rondo grapes, is the estate's biggest tribute to Martin to date. In 1983, alongside his son Clive, Martin planted 400 vines on a small patch of their family farm. Today, that same patch has grown into a thriving 30-acre vineyard.

A national bathroom company is to open a new showroom at Shrewsbury's Vanguard Way. Easy Bathrooms will open its 153rd store nationwide at 3D-E Vanguard Way early in the new year. The company already has Shropshire showrooms in both Bridgnorth and Telford. The trade counter premises at Vanguard Way were marketed by Towler Shaw Roberts.

NFU Mutual has donated £7,899 to Midlands Air Ambulance Charity in support of its life saving services. The Telford branch of NFU Mutual nominated the charity as a part of its £2.3 million national fund to support local charities. Each year, Midlands Air Ambulance Charity needs to raise £16 million to keep its helicopters and critical care cars operational.

Telford & Wrekin Council have announced a new long term partnership agreement with We Do Tennis Community Interest Company which will see it take on responsibility for the management of the Telford Tennis Centre next to Oakengates Leisure Centre over the coming weeks. New padel courts are part of the deal and will be ready for use from summer 2026. We Do Tennis already works with nearly 50 tennis clubs and 150 park tennis facilities nationally.



Vicki Thomas of Lanyon Bowdler, Stephen Handley and Maureen Powell of Belmont Community Hall, and Karen Clarke of Lanyon Bowdler



Tom Waters of Midlands Air Ambulance with Kate Hamilton of NFU Mutual

Shrewsbury-based bridge maker Beaver Bridges International represented the UK at the Rebuild Ukraine Event in Warsaw on the UK Government Pavilion, showcasing world class engineering and infrastructure expertise. The event brought together global leaders and industry experts, all united in their mission to support Ukraine's rebuilding efforts.

Law firm Lanyon Bowdler has raised £3,500 for two charities through a year-long campaign of fundraising activities by staff. The total raised has been split between Belmont Community Hall in Wellington and We Are Farming Minds – a charity that supports farmers with their mental health. Lanyon Bowdler staff nominate different charities to support each year.

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Inspiring future talent



Engineering is one of the sectors being urged to get involved

Shrewsbury College, in partnership with the Marches Careers Hub, is excited to announce a brand-new Careers Fair taking place on February 12.

This event, from 12.30pm to 7.30pm, is designed to bring together employers from across Shropshire and Mid Wales with secondary school pupils, our A Level and vocational students, and the wider public.

Unlike traditional recruitment or skills fairs, this is not about filling vacancies – it's about showcasing your industry, inspiring future talent, and helping individuals of all ages understand the career pathways and opportunities available in your sector.

It's a unique chance to raise your profile, share insights into the skills and qualities you value, and connect with new talent pools in an engaging, interactive setting.

Why Get Involved?

- **Raise Your Profile:** Position your business as a leader in your sector and a champion of local opportunity.
- **Shape Future Talent:** Help young people understand the skills, attitudes, and pathways that lead to success in your industry.
- **Access New Talent Pools:** Engage with individuals of all ages who are exploring career options – potential future employees, apprentices, or trainees.



- **Network with Peers:** Connect with other employers, educators, and stakeholders committed to developing the local workforce.
- **Showcase Your Industry:** Use spotlight talks, themed zones, and interactive conversations to inspire and inform.

We are looking for representation from the following sectors:

- Engineering & Automotive
- Construction, Utilities & Infrastructure
- Digital, Business & Professional Services
- Health, Wellbeing & Human Services
- Creative Industries
- Hospitality, Lifestyle & Service Industries

To book your stand, or to find out more, contact our employer partnership manager Jules Rhodes on julesr@shrewsbury.ac.uk or call 01743 653 460 to discuss.

This event is designed to go far beyond traditional skills shows; it's an interactive experience focused on career pathways, training options, and the real-world skills employers value most.

About Shrewsbury College

- Shrewsbury College was formed following the merger of Shrewsbury Sixth Form College and Shrewsbury College on 1 August 2016 – it was renamed in September 2025 from Shrewsbury Colleges Group
- The college is the largest sixth form college in the country. It provides post-16 education to approximately 4,200 16- to 18-year-old students and offers adult education, higher education, community learning, and apprenticeship training. In total, the college works with around 9,000 students each year.
- Ofsted inspected the college in March 2025 with a team of 13 inspectors. The college was graded as 'Outstanding' for Overall Effectiveness, with 'Outstanding' grades for Quality of Education, Behaviour and Attitudes, Personal Development, Leadership and Management, Education Programmes for Young People, Adult Learning Programmes, and Provision for Learners with High Needs, and rated Good for Apprenticeships.



The Source team has been working with Tyrrells since 2017



Working on designs for a special Downton Abbey range

Crisp design idea

A Shropshire design company has played a pivotal role in the bold and unashamedly 'British' approach to marketing and brand personality for one of the country's best known crisps brands.

Tyrrells Crisps was founded in 2002 at a farm just south of Ludlow, using potatoes grown in its fields, and was acquired by KP Snacks in 2018.

Shrewsbury-based Source has worked with the business for nearly 10 years, encompassing everything from new product development to packaging, advertising, concept design, store graphics, social and website design.

The team says the challenge has been to help keep Tyrrells fresh, vibrant and relevant in the very competitive crisp sector which was worth around £3.2 billion in the UK last year.

The Tyrrells brand retail sales volume has grown from £49 million in 2018 to £72 million in 2025 – an increase of nearly 47% – making it the UK's number one hand-cooked potato crisps brand.

Leaning heavily into its geographical and cultural roots, Tyrrells has made use of nostalgic black-and-white photography on its packaging, overlaid with playful colour to create a charmingly eccentric and stand-out identity.

Nick Richardson, director at Source, has been involved with the brand since the beginning of the relationship in 2017.

He said: "It's been an incredible experience working with one of the UK's best-loved brands. The original brief was to create and support the growth of Tyrrells' digital presence, but that soon grew as we started to work more closely with the in-house brand team."



Nick Richardson with designer James Musgrave and account manager Jasmine Mellor

Source has since worked on re-designing the packs of the core crisp products, clearly and succinctly getting across the 'quirky' British tone.

It has also worked on a range of other influential and successful marketing campaigns, press advertisements, social media campaigns, animations and product launches.

"Over the years we have supported a wide range of communications and marketing projects for Tyrrells," said Nick.

"We've grown to really understand the tone of Tyrrells, what makes it resonate with its target audiences and also how it communicates to other stakeholder groups too. It's a privileged position to be in, when you can support making such a big impact across a well-loved brand."

Nick said one of the most important roles the team at Source has played is helping Tyrrells improve its sustainability credentials

and reducing the number of resources used in its packaging.

Since 2022 the brand has made significant in-roads in reducing packaging by up to 25% on its top four potato crisps 'sharing packs' in the UK, and since 2024 the packets have used 25% recycled plastic – increasing to 30% this year.

"We reviewed the amount of colours and inks used on the packaging and reduced these down. This means Tyrrells are now using fewer resources in printing their packs.

"We've also been privileged to work across collaborations with brands such as Wallace and Gromit and the Hairy Bikers.

"Our most recent creative project was developing and rolling out the Downton Abbey Limited Edition crisps. This was so much fun and gives me and the whole team such a sense of pride when we see them stacked high on the shelves."



The vision - how the completed Telford Theatre will look



Demolition work is now well under way on the old theatre building

Demolition, relocation and regeneration

Few towns in the county can be experiencing such a dramatic facelift right now as Oakengates.

Central to the town's multi-million pound regeneration is the transformational work to rebuild Telford's theatre, which is due to open in just under a year's time.

Work to demolish the main theatre hall in preparation for a brand new facility began shortly before the end of the year, and is now well under way.

The majority of the theatre is being completely rebuilt to transform both the exterior and interior of the building and provide a new venue which is expected to bring additional footfall to the town.

New facilities will include a larger main auditorium, modernised backstage facilities, a separate studio theatre to support community groups and smaller acts, new community art room, newly-transformed foyer and theatre dining area, and an upgraded public bar.

A series of preparatory works have already been completed including the demolition of the old Oakengates nursery and a soft stripping of the main auditorium.

In addition, a 'structural separation' has also taken place between the old library - which will remain as a separate building - and the theatre building so it can be demolished safely.

Now it's over to Garvey Demolition, which has the job of demolishing the main theatre hall which has stood at the centre of Oakengates for decades.

Once reopened, the theatre will also complement the investment into Limes Walk which is providing new homes, retail units and a new outdoor market as well as a new dedicated library.

Telford & Wrekin Council has received funding from central government and topped up the total funding investment to deliver the project.

All in all, the local authority is investing £300 million into a range of new developments across the borough. Other investment in Oakengates includes the transformation of the 1960s shopping precinct into modern shop units with residential apartments above.

Telford & Wrekin Council leader Lee Carter says: "These are exciting times.

"Telford Theatre is at the heart of our entertainment offering in the borough and this new facility will bring a brand new theatre to Oakengates with some of the best facilities around.

"The demolition work is the next chapter in the project and we can't wait to see the new theatre start to take shape."

Councillor Angela McClements, the authority's cabinet member for leisure, tourism, culture and the arts, adds: "While the old theatre building holds lots of special memories, this demolition work is making way for a fantastic new facility on our doorstep.

"The new theatre will make Oakengates a more exciting and vibrant place to be and boost the local economy, as well as reducing the theatre's carbon footprint considerably."

Oliver Barby, director at Garvey Demolition said: "As a Telford-based contractor working within the local area is important to us and it is a privilege to be involved in this scheme.

"The theatre holds many memories for our workforce who have had great times attending various events over the past 30 years and we will all look forward to using the new facility in the future.

"The demolition works to this point have been interesting as well as challenging to demolish such a building in a safe manner."

The theatre work has had knock-on effects for other businesses in the town including Celebrations, the greetings card shop which has served Oakengates for the past 40 years. It relocated to a newly-refurbished unit at Limes Walk ahead of the theatre demolition works.

The council has supported business owners Verendra Hayre and Jaspinder Singh, helping them with the move.

Verendra said: "We're really happy with the new unit and our customers are as well which is important. This is a brand new shop and the way we've organised it means we can still offer the same great range of items as in our previous location.

The first phase of the project was completed in October 2024 and work has been progressing ever since.

"It's early days but so far the feedback has been very positive and as well as retaining our loyal customer base we're hoping to attract many more customers from far and wide in our new location."

The relocation is part of the Oakengates Theatre Quarter project, which is transforming dated 1960s retail units on Market Street and Limes Walk into contemporary commercial spaces with residential accommodation above.

The Theatre Quarter spans the area between Oakengates Theatre and The Wakes, including Limes Walk, where shop frontages have been upgraded to create a brighter, more welcoming environment.

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

The first phase of the project was completed in October 2024 and work has been progressing ever since.

A well-known local takeaway has also relocated to a new permanent unit as part of the ongoing works. Ephesus Pizza & Grill, previously on Limes Walk, has moved to a new unit in Market Street.

Owner Faruk Yuksel says he is delighted with the new space and is hoping the improved visibility will lead to a growth in the business, which employs four people.



Councillor Steve Reynolds, Ersin Karakulah, Faruk Yuksel and Councillor Ollie Vickers outside Ephesus on Market Street

THEATRE QUARTER: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 18 new housing units
- 1,590 sq metres of new and refurbished commercial space
- Enhanced public realm space linking The Place Theatre and High Street, providing a focus for community and commercial activity
- Widening the provision of leisure and hospitality and boosting the night-time economy

"I'm so pleased with my new unit which is much more spacious and visible on Market Street. Already, we're seeing more footfall than our previous unit, attracting more customers and passers-by due to the new location.

"We really needed the extra space so this new unit is much better for us and it gives me the opportunity to grow the business further now." Another business which has been on the move is ExtraCare - but only temporarily. It is now up and running back at its original location in Market Street.

The shop, which works to create better lives for older people, moved down the street to allow for the shop frontage to be completely refurbished.

And in case you are wondering what these changes mean for the much loved 'Oakengates - The Heart of Telford' arched sign, it is safely stored away, ready to be relocated after all the refurbishment work has been completed.

Councillor Ollie Vickers, Telford & Wrekin Council's cabinet member for the economy and transport, said: "This sign was funded as part of the Telford 50 legacy so has been a key feature of the town centre by The Wakes for some time.

"We are keen to retain historic and prominent features which are important to our residents and visitors. Hopefully, this will allay any concerns that the sign is being lost completely."



Celebrations owner Verendra Hayre outside the new unit at Limes Walk

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- Kidderminster
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The 2.1 acre Smithfield Works site in Oswestry



Thorne Works in Dorrington

Commercial property future



JAMES EVANS, head of commercial property at Halls, reflects on the past year and forecasts some of the key trends for Shropshire’s commercial property market in 2026

Navigating Property Sectors

We expect the industrial property sector to remain strong, especially for investors and owner-occupiers.

With construction costs still high, there remains strong demand for established industrial sites which are seen to offer better investment value for owner occupiers and investment.

In 2025, as a practice we sold sites like Thorne Works at Dorrington, and Smithfield Works in Oswestry sold for £1.5 million. We anticipate 2026 to see continued strength and interest in industrial units.

Retail remains mixed. High street areas like Ludlow have seen decline, with businesses closing or not renewing leases. However, Shrewsbury shows signs of recovery into the new year.

While national retailers struggle, closures like Bodycare in Shrewsbury and Welshpool offer opportunities to re-let prime units. Positively, our practice already has under offer the former Bodycare unit in Shrewsbury.

The outlook for retail hubs and the tail-end of the motorway-adjacent distribution unit boom remains volatile – high tenant rents are now unachievable, leaving many developers with vacant spaces.

The Inevitable Economic Impact

Economic policies announced in the latter part of 2025 from our current Government caused distraction, and with a settling period expected as we move into 2026, political decisions continue to pose a challenge to pin down trends. The outlook will remain changeable; however, regardless we are seeing a great deal of localisation, driving positive activity for sales, lettings and large acquisitions.

Into 2026, we expect the market to remain influenced by government policies, economic factors and investor confidence will continue to drive CRE market evolution. It’s the age-old conundrum that factors into past and future considerations – the marketplace will inevitably be shaped by government policies, business rates and economic sentiment.

Data-Led Decisions

Data will continue to drive commercial property decisions in 2026, with advanced analytics, rapid access to comparable leases and sales, and tech-driven platforms (especially AI) enhancing market insight and forecasting.

While data is a key differentiator, we emphasise that it must be paired with professional intuition and market experience to interpret trends and act ahead of shifts for long-term strategic planning – this will be a balancing act to master in 2026.

Adapting to Evolve

Adaptability into 2026 will be key. Halls Commercial has outperformed in a challenging 2025 market thanks to a combination of our expertise and client service and market insight; we will carry this approach forward into 2026.



The former Sentinel Works in Shrewsbury has a new lease of life

We expect that the commercial landscape will remain an "opportunity-driven" market, where investors, guided by knowledgeable agents, can find longer term high-yield opportunities and possibly explore off-market opportunities.

Reflecting on 2025

Rewinding to 2025, we achieved strong sales, lettings and management outcomes across diverse asset classes, while expanding our national presence with acquisitions and disposals from Glasgow to Bristol, to Cornwall and Plymouth.

Despite some market challenges, we made significant progress in the commercial market as a whole.

Sales, lettings and acquisitions highlights included the off-market acquisition of City West Commercial Premises at Victoria Business Park, Roche, Cornwall. Acting for a long-standing client, Halls Commercial secured the 2.96-acre site for over £1.5 million.

We also facilitated the acquisition of Plot 1B at Ma6nitude, Middlewich, for a national retained client. The greenfield site offers flexible development options, near 100% occupancy, and strong SME interest, making it a prime investment.

In Shropshire, notable 2025 deals included acting as sole agents for Sentinel Trade Park, an 8.43-acre business park with 179,005 ft² of warehouse/manufacturing space and 14,730 ft² of offices. Key leases include Costa, Enterprise, Lakeside Coaches, and a major NHS letting, plus Enterprise Mobility relocating its Shrewsbury depot for 50 vehicles.

Other transactions included the former Jewsons site in Telford, acquired for close to £2 million and earmarked for redevelopment, and £1 million prime retail investment for Marshall & Marshall Ltd, featuring units let to EE, Optical Express and a dental practice.

Finally, the 2.1-acre Smithfield Works site in Oswestry, with 8,887 sq ft of commercial space, sold quickly to the region’s largest independent tool, plant, and powered access hire company for over £1 million.

James Evans is head of commercial property at Halls



A riverside get-together in Shrewsbury during August



The pre-Christmas party in December

Connecting young professionals

Shropshire Rising Professionals is celebrating a highly successful past year, marked by growing attendance, a strong base of returning members, and a clear impact on its aim to connect professionals in the early stages of their careers.

Now approaching three years since its launch, the group has gone from strength to strength, welcoming a steady stream of new faces while continuing to attract consistent attendees.

Throughout last year, events were hosted at a variety of venues, offering relaxed but purposeful opportunities for young professionals to build confidence, develop meaningful local connections, and sharpen their networking skills.

The calendar ranged from informal social evenings and creative activities to charity-focused gatherings that encouraged open conversation and community engagement.

Organisers say 2026 is already shaping up to be another exceptional year, with sponsorship secured for all its scheduled events, including backing from Balfours, Azets, Aaron & Partners, Morris & Co, WR Partners and Handelsbanken.

Organisers Abigail Murray and Natalie Antenbring said: "It has been incredibly rewarding to look back on the past year and see just how far the network has come.

"What started as a small group of professionals sat around a table has grown into a thriving community that continues to go from strength to strength as we approach our third year.

"Seeing so many members return event after event has created a strong, supportive foundation, and the fact that sponsorship is now fully-booked for 2026 is something we're immensely proud of.

"None of this would be possible without the people who believe in what we're building, and we're excited to keep growing the network together, so thank you to everyone who continues to support and shape Shropshire Rising Professionals."

Shropshire Rising Professionals says it remains committed to its core aim: helping young professionals build strong local relationships early in their careers, gain confidence in networking, and feel part of a thriving professional community.

For updates on upcoming events, follow @shropshirerisingprofessionals on Instagram or email events@aaronandpartners.com to join the mailing list.



Halloween fun for Rebecca Ashley, Natalie Antenbring, Phoebe Bishton and Abigail Murray



Carrie Wright and Amelie Jones



James Satoor and Emily Shenton



Natalie Antenbring, Abigail Murray and Carrie Wright



Phoebe Bishton and Bailey

Such a welcoming hub

A new Co-Work Hub is being launched in Shropshire to support freelancers, creatives, remote workers, and small business owners. The Shropshire Growth Hub is holding a series of pilot sessions at Shrewsbury Flaxmill on February 27, March 27 and April 24.

We believe the Shropshire Growth Hub has played a meaningful role in this achievement through its innovative approach and openness to new ideas

The aim is for the Co-Work Hub to become a regular series, with potential to expand to a larger site. It will offer a co-working environment where

attendees can work independently but still have the benefits of company, community and collaboration with other new and small business owners.

The intention is to provide a welcoming space where individuals can share experiences and access informal guidance from an expert-in-residence over a coffee.

Steve Periton, founder of Nodsboy, has played a key role in shaping this initiative. He said: "We are creating a space where founders can work, connect and grow together without the pressure of formal networking. It fills a real gap for small businesses in Shropshire, offering both community and practical support."

Rob Wilson, cabinet member for transport and economic growth at Shropshire Council, said: "Launching a new business can feel daunting and risky, but Shropshire stands out in the West Midlands with its strong business survival rate."

"We believe the Shropshire Growth Hub has played a meaningful role in this achievement through its innovative approach and openness to new ideas."

"Its strength lies in working closely with the very people it wants to help, staying connected and informed about local small business needs, and then delivering the necessary support."

Another acquisition in the United States

Reconomy, the international circular economy specialist and former Shropshire Company of the Year, is continuing to grow its presence in America with its seventh US acquisition.

The latest business to join the Telford-based group is Integrated Waste Analysts, which has its headquarters in Hanover, Maryland. The deal was completed shortly after the acquisition of Connecticut-based National Waste.

Guy Wakeley, chief executive of Reconomy, said: "Integrated Waste Analysts is an important acquisition which brings new capabilities to our rapidly growing US operations."

"We have now completed seven acquisitions in North America in just over a year and built a top five waste and recycling management business from scratch."

"This is in line with our strategic priorities of attaining leading positions in our core international markets and commitment to allocating capital to where the most attractive opportunities lie."

Having scaled up operations across the UK and Europe, Reconomy says it is now focused on the next phase of a growth strategy 'to build a material position in the US', capitalising on significant opportunities in the world's largest market.

Funding for youth-led projects

A new £20,000 fund has been launched to support young people facing barriers to education, employment and training across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

The Denso JCE Grant – managed by the Shropshire Community Foundation – will provide grants of up to £5,000 to grassroots organisations delivering youth-led, creative, skills and mentoring projects.

The fund aims to empower 16–25-year-olds who are care leavers, home-educated, or living in areas of high deprivation. Across the region many young people face significant obstacles to achieving their potential because of the areas they live in.

Care leavers and home-educated young people are particularly at risk of social isolation and exclusion.

The number of home-educated children continues to increase highlighting the growing need for flexible, locally delivered and inclusive support that can connect young people with positive opportunities and future pathways.

The grants fund has been made possible with funding from Denso Automotive UK Ltd, part of the world's largest automotive parts and systems providers, and electrical contractors JCE and Sons Ltd of Telford.

Phil Tomlinson, head of HR and HSE at Denso, said: "We believe every young person deserves the opportunity to realise their potential, no matter their background."

"This fund reflects our commitment to



SCF trustee Mandy Thorn with Paul Craven of JCE and Sons, SCF chair Selina Graham, and Paul O'Brien of Denso

investing in communities and supporting young people to build the confidence, skills and ambition to take their next steps into education, training or employment."

"This grant is not just about funding activities," said Paul Craven, director at electrical contractors JCE and Sons.

"It's about ensuring young people who are often overlooked have the chance to shape their own futures and strengthen the communities they're part of."

Organisations must be not-for-profit and able to deliver within Shropshire and/or Telford & Wrekin. While match funding is not required, additional support in cash or kind is welcomed.

Projects should be participative and

developmental, focusing on creativity, skills, mentoring, and pathways to education, employment or training.

Sonia Roberts, trustee for Shropshire Community Foundation, said: "Small, grassroots organisations are often the closest to young people who feel left out of mainstream opportunities."

"The Denso JCE Grant will help them deliver creative, youth-led projects that not only build confidence and belonging but also open the door to real, lasting change."

Applications for the current funding round are now closed. Successful projects will start in early 2026 and can run for up to 12 months. For more details, visit www.shropshirecf.org.uk

Collaboration brings a fresh look to reception

Two Shropshire businesses demonstrated the value of local partnerships by collaborating to redesign a welcome area for visitors to the county.

Oswestry-based Aico hosts regular events at its site and welcomes a large number of visitors every year – and until recently, a pop-up table was used for many of those events. Telford-based Chrisbeon were called in to help.

"We realised that this setup didn't reflect the professional and welcoming image expected of a market-leading company," said marketing manager Alex Garmston.

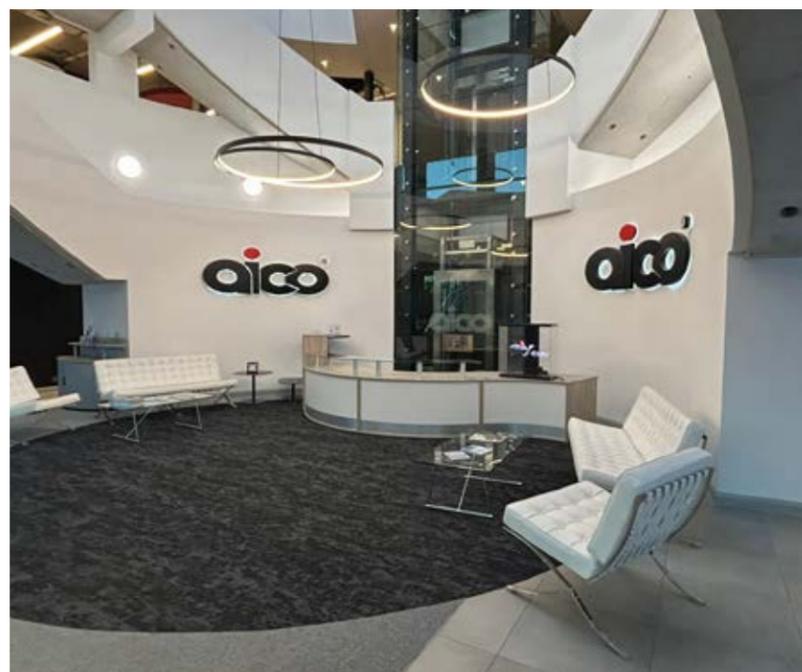
"Chrisbeon have supplied much of our current office furniture, and we've developed a strong, reliable working relationship with them over the years. We always aim to source locally and support suppliers based in Shropshire, so they are a natural fit for us."

Both Aico and Telford-based Chrisbeon Office Supplies are longstanding Patrons of the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, and their relationship has been built over many years, strengthened through the Chamber network.

"As always, Craig at Chrisbeon was incredibly helpful, offering creative ideas along with a range of examples and design concepts for a new reception desk," said Alex.

Chrisbeon partner Craig Hughes said the project was a strong example of why long-term supplier relationships matter – not just for convenience, but for understanding, trust and shared goals.

He said: "Because we've worked with Aico for many years, we understand their culture, the way their spaces need to function, and the impression they want visitors to have."



The new reception – a collaboration between Aico and Chrisbeon



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Bookkeeper on 'Oscars' shortlist

A Pontesbury-based business was shortlisted for honours in the 'Oscars' of the bookkeeping industry.

Hollies Bookkeeping Services was one of six finalists in the large practice of the year category of the LUCA awards, run by the Institute of Certified Bookkeepers.

The company – which was founded in 2010 – employs nine part-time staff and supports more than 150 clients across Shropshire and beyond.

Some of the team travelled to London for the awards dinner, held at the QEII Centre in London.

Founder and director Julie Williams said: "The future of bookkeeping is changing fast, and we're excited about it.

"AI and automation promise to free us from repetitive data entry and allow us to focus on what we do best – analysis, insights, and human connection.

"With Making Tax Digital and quarterly self-assessment submissions on the horizon, we're already helping clients adapt, providing real-time data and meaningful financial reports that empower smarter decision-making."

The competition's organisers said: "The Oscars of the bookkeeping world, the annual ICB LUCA Awards recognise outstanding achievement in the bookkeeping profession and reveal the favourite software and apps of the nation's bookkeepers.

"The finalists were chosen by a panel of independent judges as the very best from this year's impressive selection of entries."



Manager Kathryn Massey with coffee shop assistant Ashton Wallis

Plating up more

A Bridgnorth café has doubled its capacity as part of a major renovation and expansion.

Apley on the High Street has moved its kitchen to the back of the site and knocked down a wall, enabling the business to expand its retail offering to include more products from Apley Farm Shop.

Linda Harris, business development manager at Apley, added: "The whole estate team were very excited about the renovations to Apley's in Bridgnorth, and now they have been completed the next project will be to redesign the outside courtyard aspect to elevate the aesthetics and provide a further seating and service area."

The second phase of redevelopment is due to take place in spring and will include renovating the courtyard to create an outdoor seating area.

Award win for sustainability

A soft drinks manufacturer on the west Shropshire border has been named Sustainable Supplier of the Year in the annual gold medal awards run by the Federation of Wholesale Distributors.

Radnor Hills was recognised for 'leading the way in sustainability far beyond its size and scale' and judges described it as 'a landslide win'.

The FWD Gold Medal Awards celebrate excellence in the UK wholesale channel. Suppliers and wholesalers are recognised for outstanding performance across a number of categories.

The Sustainable Supplier Award recognises businesses that demonstrate measurable strides in reducing their environmental impact and inspiring a culture of sustainability.

The FWD judges said: "From achieving zero waste to landfill since 2018 to investing in on-site solar power that now provides over 20% of its energy needs, Radnor Hills continues to set the benchmark for credible, science-based climate action."

Radnor Hills is one of the UK's leading soft drinks manufacturers and all its drinks are made using the exceptionally pure Welsh spring water sourced from its boreholes just minutes from its production site in Knighton.

Independent and family-owned, the 35-year-old company produces over 400 million still, sparkling and flavoured water drinks every year.

Simon Knight, managing director of Radnor Hills, said: "Sustainability is embedded within our business and we have put in place a number of measures to directly support decarbonisation within the soft drinks and wholesale supply chain – from providing lower carbon product options, improving logistics efficiency and promoting packaging sustainability.

"By integrating renewable energy, packaging circularity, and carbon management into our growth strategy, we support both our commercial partners and the wider wholesale sector in achieving shared Net Zero goals."

New business model



Craig Howard of ANTA Education

After six years supporting adults into employment, Telford-based ANTA Education has announced a transformation of its business model.

The Stafford Park-based company says it will move a large proportion of the business into an 'alternative school'.

Founder Craig Howard said the decision was driven by national funding challenges and limited partnership opportunities for adult employment programmes, plus a sharp increase in young people not in education, employment, or training.

"We've always been committed to helping people find sustainable employment. But with the current funding climate and the rise in NEET figures, we saw an opportunity to intervene earlier – before young people fall into long-term unemployment."

He said the new alternative school would provide tailored education and employability pathways for young people who struggle in traditional settings, aiming to reduce the risk of future joblessness and improve life chances.

"While this pivot was necessary for the business to survive, it also means we can impact more lives in the long term. Our goal has always been to change lives, and this move allows us to do that on a bigger scale."

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Thank you for positivity

Businesses across Telford and Wrekin have been recognised for the positive impact they have had on their local high street.

A total of 29 High Street Heroes have been crowned in towns across the borough – nominated by local residents, members of the public and businesses who use their services and feel they make a valuable contribution to the local community.

More than 1,500 nominations were received, and winners came from Dawley, Ironbridge, Madeley, Newport, Oakengates and Wellington.

They included hair salons, cafes, butchers, pubs, dance companies and clothes shops.

There was also a 'Not on the high street' award which was won by The Park in Wellington which isn't on a borough town high street but received some of the highest votes for the town.

It is part of the council's Pride in Our High Street programme, which supports local businesses and retailers through business start-up trial grants and business start-up grants.

Start-up trial grants give previously home-based or online businesses the opportunity to test them out on the high street in the form of a market stall or small retail unit, while business start-up grants give businesses the opportunities to expand by having a permanent high street presence.



Bangla Pride in Oakengates was one of 29 High Street Heroes across the borough

High Street Heroes - the winners

Dawley: Mo's Barbers, Elephant & Castle, Amanda's Ow Bist'Ro, Chasni

Madeley: The Indian Melting Pot, Sweet Little Things, Foresters Arms, Anstice Pharmacy, Yutopia Spa

Oakengates: Bangla Pride, Shelly's Creations, Station Hotel, Ste's Cutz, Crown Inn

Ironbridge: Kiddos Kingdom, Ironbridge Interiors, Crust & Crumbs, Darbys, Moonshine & Fuggles

Newport: The Travel Store, The Stag & Scotch Micropub, Immi's Cakes & Bakes, Pretty Puds

Wellington: Powerpoint Stores, Boardroom Gaming Cafe, Park Street Kitchen, Zoe Trends, Odd Pals, The Park (not on the high street)



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Shaping the future of skills



Rosie Beswick

Imagine a Marches area where every business, regardless of size or sector, has the skilled workforce it needs to thrive. That future starts with you.

The Marches Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is your direct line to decision makers – your chance to ensure training and development truly reflect the needs of our business community.

Why does your input matter?

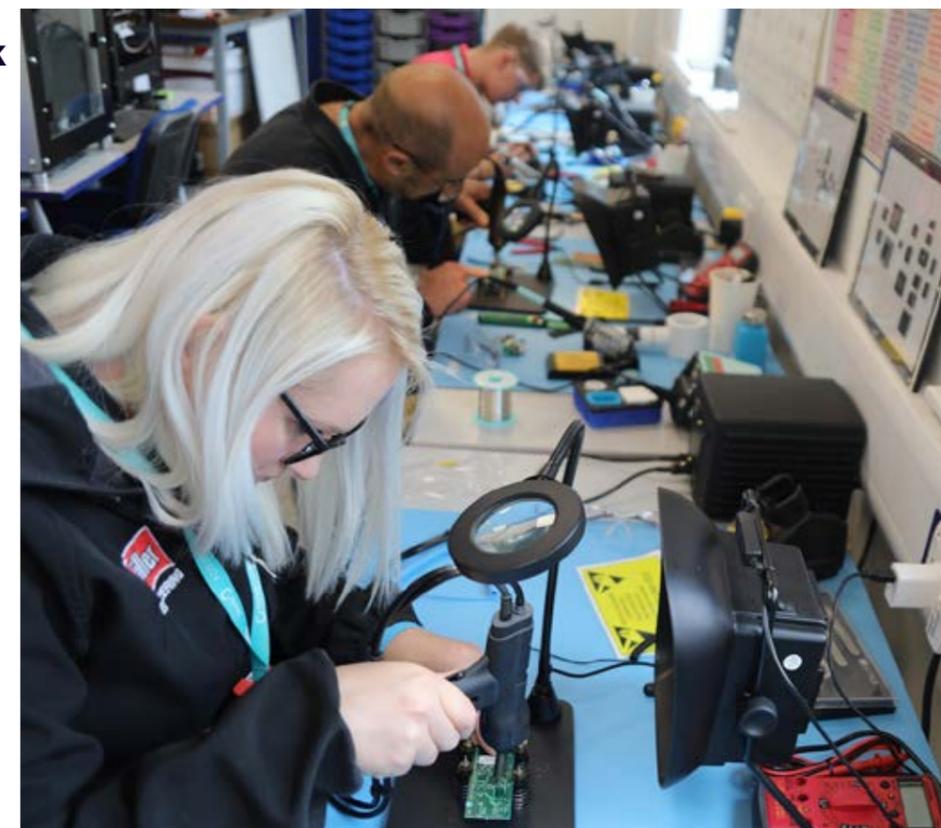
- Real change happens when you speak up. In 2023/24, over 1,000 businesses across the Marches (Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire) shared their views. The result? New courses, upgraded facilities, and targeted funding were created because local businesses made their voices heard, shared their knowledge and worked with the trainers to ensure the right choices were made.
- Without your insight, decisions are made on assumptions – not facts. That risks leaving our local economy behind. Your experience and perspective are vital to shaping the skills agenda for today and tomorrow.

Now is the time for every business and employer to step up and make your voice heard. If you don't take action, decisions about the future of skills in our region will be made without your insight – leaving your needs to chance.

The business community has already shown its power to drive real change, but today's world is moving faster than ever: two major Budgets have reshaped the landscape, AI is revolutionising how we work, and technology changed the way younger people work and communicate. In just two years, everything about recruitment, training, and the workplace has shifted.

We cannot afford to stand still. Your input is critical – by completing the survey, you ensure that our decision makers have the facts they need to support your business, not just assumptions. Don't let others decide your future. Take action now, be the catalyst for progress, and help us build a workforce ready for tomorrow.

Ready to make a difference? Take the simple confidential survey by scanning the QR code, and be the reason our region gets the skills it deserves.



Training facilities which focus on printed circuit board design and repair and micro soldering techniques are among initiatives already launched



Scan the above QR code to take the survey

What's in it for you?

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- Be part of a movement: Every response strengthens our collective voice, making it impossible for policymakers to ignore the needs of businesses across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire.

The Marches Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is one of 39 such plans across England. While it receives Government funding, it is delivered locally by Shropshire Chamber to ensure that the voices and needs of local businesses are truly understood and represented. The LSIP gives every business in the region a chance to influence the future of skills and training.

The LSIP team gathers feedback and insights directly from employers and brings this research to decision makers at both local and national levels. They work closely with the three Local Authorities, colleges, universities, private training providers, and specialist organisations such as CITB and Skills for Care. This collaborative approach ensures that everyone involved has a complete picture of the region's skills needs.

By collecting and sharing this information, the LSIP helps decision makers understand what skills are needed, what is practical to deliver, and how best to support local businesses. Ultimately, this process guides who will provide new or updated training and other activities to help businesses in Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin, and Herefordshire succeed.

Rosie Beswick is Marches LSIPs project manager. Want a personal conversation? Email rosieshropchamber@gmail.com to book a confidential interview



Matt Laws



Felicity Wingrove



Alastair Dawes



Andy Begley

Shropshire Chamber appoints four new directors in a refresh

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has appointed four new directors as part of a refresh of its governing board.

The appointments were ratified by members at the Chamber's annual meeting, held at Hawkstone Park. The new directors are:

- Matt Laws: vice principal at Shrewsbury College, where he leads on technical and vocational education and training
- Felicity Wingrove: a communications and leadership development specialist, and founding director of Telford Business Board
- Alastair Dawes: Harper Adams University's director of business development and knowledge exchange

- Andy Begley: an experienced leader who has spent the past five years as chief executive of Shropshire Council

Hayley Norgrove, operations director at driver training organisation Dulson Training Ltd, has also been appointed as a new associate director, further broadening the skill-set of the team.

Shropshire Chamber chief executive Ruth Ross said: "With a strong senior leadership team now in place and operational management firmly embedded, we have redefined the role of the Board to focus



Hayley Norgrove

purely on strategic direction, oversight, and governance.

"We invited applications from local business people who are keen to help shape the future of the Chamber by drawing on their professional experience, sector knowledge, and commitment to Shropshire's economic and business ecosystem.

"We had an incredibly strong list of

applicants, and I'm confident that these new directors will motivate and influence the Chamber's senior leadership team with the benefit of their strong strategic thinking and decision-making capabilities."

Matt said: "At Shrewsbury College, we are proud to be at the heart of Shropshire's response to the Government's Skills Agenda. We know that meaningful progress starts with listening – understanding the real challenges and evolving needs of our local employers."

Felicity, a behavioural science specialist and founder of Zen Communications, said: "I'm really excited about the opportunity to come back home to Shropshire, after 18 months working globally, and to be able to bring my skills, experience, and passion to the Chamber team and membership."

Alastair, who has a career spanning over 20 years, has led transformative projects worth millions, from digital innovation partnerships to skills development programmes. He said he was 'deeply committed' to regional growth and social impact.

Andy said: "My career has been shaped by leading complex public and private sector organisations through challenge, change and transformation. I'm now operating across digital strategy, growth planning and operational optimisation for ambitious UK-based businesses."

Family law team enhanced



Newly-qualified Lizzie Cross

Shropshire law firm Lanyon Bowdler has appointed a newly-qualified lawyer to its family law team who has a particular interest in legal issues concerning farming families.

Lizzie Cross completed her training contract after joining the firm in January 2021, gaining extensive experience as a legal assistant in the firm's top-rated family department.

Lanyon Bowdler's family team is top-ranked by Chambers UK and accredited by the Law Society for family law, making them one of the leading teams in the Midlands. Lizzie qualified as a solicitor at the beginning of November and will split her working time between the firm's offices in Shrewsbury, Hereford and Ludlow.

Lizzie said: "I am from a farming background and have a keen interest in farming-related divorces and will look to grow my expertise in this area."



Nick Wood of Morris Capital

Leading the way to fulfil ambition

Nick Wood has joined Morris & Company as chief executive officer for the company's newly-launched Morris Capital.

Morris Capital has been established to further the fifth-generation property company's strategy to effectively expand its property operation and geographical footprint into the Birmingham region.

Nick – a chartered surveyor with longstanding experience in the Midlands commercial real estate market – joins from Savills where he was a director and executive board member working in the Investment team.

Nick said: "Morris has a unique history and unrivalled track record and as a 'Shropshire lad' working in property, I have always seen Morris Property as a pioneer in commercial development. I am delighted to now have the opportunity to work with an incredible team with its positive and ambitious ethos.

"I am looking forward to utilising my experience and professional network to help deliver continued success and grow the company's existing investment portfolio – an exciting challenge, especially in this counter-cyclical market."

Robin Morris, chairman of Morris & Company, said: "Working alongside our senior development and estates property teams here, I am confident Nick's experience, knowledge and contacts within the Birmingham property scene will help us access this neighbouring region which is brimming with opportunity for investment and development."

New trustees with experience



Dr Laurence Ginder and Dr Amruta Lacy-Colson join the Board for a term of five years

Lingen Davies Cancer Support has announced the appointment of two new trustees with extensive clinical experience.

Dr Laurence Ginder and Dr Amruta Lacy-Colson join the Board for a term of five years. Both have a significant understanding of local and regional cancer care, and have extensive experience working directly with those in the community facing cancer.

Tim Cooper, chair of the Board, said: "With statistics showing that one in two people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, we know that demand for our support will continue to grow. We have set ourselves ambitious targets for the future to ensure we continue having a life-changing impact on local lives affected by cancer.

"I'm pleased to welcome Dr Laurence Ginder and Dr Amruta Lacy-Colson to the Board who bring with them an extensive understanding of cancer care."



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Five new trainees for legal profession

Five new trainees have joined Shropshire-based Aaron & Partners to embark on their legal careers, linking up with a variety of departments across the law firm.

In addition to the new hires, four solicitors have also qualified into permanent roles with the firm.

Mercedes Sharp joins restructuring and insolvency, while Lucy Harrison, Charlotte Price and Matthew Fletcher-Hunt have all qualified

into the firm's fast-growing dispute resolution team.

Aaron & Partners has a strong track record of hiring trainees in recent years and has appointed more than 20 since launching a dedicated trainee programme four years ago.

Nick Clarke, senior partner at Aaron & Partners, said: "It's always a real pleasure to see new faces joining the firm and to celebrate those who've successfully completed their

training and are now continuing their careers with us as qualified solicitors.

"Many of our senior lawyers, myself included, began our careers here as trainees, so I know first-hand how valuable that early experience can be. Investing in young talent isn't just about building the future of our firm – it's about helping people achieve their potential in a supportive, ambitious environment."

Continued growth



Daniel Thomas, Paul Madeley and Daisy Whiteman

Madeleys Chartered Surveyors has appointed two new members of staff at its offices in Much Wenlock – the town mayor and the youngest councillor to ever serve on the town council.

Town mayor Councillor Dan Thomas and Councillor Daisy Whiteman have joined the High Street team.

The expansion is due to continued growth across the business including rural, commercial and agricultural portfolios and meets the company's commitment of recruiting locally.

It means a change of career for Dan who spent the last 10 years working in HR, latterly

as HR director of a local care company. He has joined Madeleys as a trainee rural surveyor and will be studying for his masters through Harper Adams University.

Meanwhile Daisy takes up a role in client services and marketing and will be doing a marketing apprenticeship.

Paul Madeley, the company's managing director and founder, said: "These are very exciting times for the company as we continue to grow as a business and have some big plans in the pipeline."

"It's a big career change for Dan but he is relishing the challenge. Daisy brings a better understanding of today's technological world to the business and how we can make the most of the available opportunities in those areas."

Scheme is delivering homes



Steve Woodbine is congratulated by Paul Breen

Living Space Housing has promoted Steve Woodbine to site manager. He joined the company in July 2020 as an assistant site manager and has since supported the delivery of several key developments.

In his new capacity, Steve will lead the company's newly-approved £10 million residential development in Shrewsbury, off Cedars Drive.

The scheme will deliver 38 high quality affordable and social homes, helping to address the national shortage of housing. Developed in partnership with Housing Plus Group, the scheme will provide a diverse mix of shared ownership, affordable rent and social rent.

Managing director Paul Breen said: "Steve's promotion is thoroughly well-deserved. He has demonstrated exceptional professionalism and commitment throughout his time at Living Space, and his contribution to our award-winning projects has been invaluable."

Steve said: "Over the past few years, I've had the privilege of working on a number of fantastic projects and alongside a talented team."



James Jesic is the new chief executive

Former graduate to chief executive

Severn Trent has appointed James Jesic as its new chief executive, succeeding Liv Garfield who stepped down from the board at the end of December.

James was previously capital and commercial services director at Severn Trent and managing director of Hafren Dyfrdwy Cyfyngedig.

James, a chartered engineer, joined Severn Trent as a graduate in 2003 and has since worked across the full breadth of the business. He was appointed to the Severn Trent executive committee in 2018, later becoming customer operations director. In 2023 he became capital and commercial services director, responsible for delivering the Severn Trent's multi-billion-pound capital design and delivery programme.

James said: "I've been privileged enough to lead many parts of the business, and to now become CEO is an absolute honour. The pride I feel for Severn Trent and for the Midlands is huge. Not only have I grown my career within this business, but I've always been a Severn Trent customer."

"Every day I see first-hand the passion and pride that Severn Trenters bring in delivering our service and I am excited to continue that for years to come, and lead the business forward into its next chapter, delivering for customers, the region and all of our stakeholders."

Office manager is appointed

Leanne Taylor has joined HR Solutions Shropshire as office manager to help support more than 100 clients.

Company founder Ishbel Lapper said a number of new client wins and the growing profile of the Telford-based business were behind the move.

"We've taken on several new clients in the last few months and when Leanne became available, I snapped up the chance to bring her on board. I've worked with her before and I know just how good she will be in the role."

Ishbel, who worked for some of the country's best-known retail names before setting up her own business, said uncertainty over changes to employment laws were driving the company's growth.

"The big changes contained in the Employment Rights Bill – including a widening of day one rights for employees – have created considerable anxiety for

employers, who need to make sure they comply with all the legislation.

"A lot of smaller employers, who do not have their own in-house HR team, have called us in to support them and make sure they are putting in place the measures they need."

Leanne, who lives on a canal barge in north Shropshire and has extensive experience in conveyancing, hospitality, education and insurance, said she was delighted with the appointment.

"I have known Ishbel for many years and have always admired the no-nonsense, common-sense approach she takes to HR. I'm thrilled to be part of the team."

The company won silver last year at the national Best Businesswoman Awards for best overall business and Ishbel was runner up in the Best Businesswoman in Business Services category. The company was also shortlisted in the 2025 British HR awards.



Leanne Taylor and Ishbel Lapper

Welcome to the team

Two new starters have joined the team at a Shropshire PR agency as the firm continues its commitment to supporting school leavers and graduates.

Libby Everson and Eleanor Jones were both offered jobs at Wellington-based agency J&PR Ltd after they excelled during voluntary work experience placements.

The two aspiring PR and marketing executives now join directors Kirsty Smallman and Rhea Alton – along with the rest of their team – at the company offices on Church Street.

Libby, 18, who lives in Wellington, was studying A levels at Shrewsbury College when she enjoyed a week's work experience placement at J&PR.

Kirsty said: "We talked through Libby's options for career routes within the industry and offered our support and advice. We didn't want to influence her decision fully, but were delighted when she came back to us and said she would be looking into an apprenticeship and would like to complete it with us here at J&PR."

"Libby is now a multi-channel marketing apprentice with Shrewsbury-based provider SBC Training and has been a great asset to the team."

Eleanor, 21, from Bicton Heath, Shrewsbury, applied for work experience at J&PR during her second year studying PR and media at Birmingham City University.

Following a successful work placement, Kirsty and Rhea offered Eleanor a part-time job as a digital assistant, which she could do



Kirsty Smallman, Libby Everson, Eleanor Jones and Rhea Alton from J&PR Ltd in Wellington

alongside her university lectures and her home study.

"I am very enthusiastic about work experience opportunities and I continually call for more Shropshire businesses to offer placements," said Kirsty.

"Work experience placements are an important part of recruitment for an employer, as they offer a valuable recruitment pipeline – and for the student too, as they are given the opportunity to taste an industry and make their decision as to whether it is right for them."

Rhea said that a qualification, such as a degree, often does not provide the industry experience that businesses like J&PR are

looking for, so Eleanor's work experience was an extremely important part of the process.

She said: "Young people can access careers advice, listen to stories from colleagues and be inspired by those around them – or they may think it isn't for them at the end of the experience, and that is equally as useful too. A few days, a week or regular visits can make a huge difference to the next steps for that person."

"We have recruited the majority of our team through work experience placements and Libby is now the third apprentice to go through the multi-channel marketing apprenticeship with SBC Training."

Five minutes with . . .

When LEE BRODERS from Whitchurch first started his own business building computers from home, it was simply a means to an end after a job offer fell through. But now he's a serial entrepreneur running six businesses, including a consultancy, a photography firm, an equine centre and a legal services business.

WHAT DOES YOUR JOB INVOLVE?

I help business owners and entrepreneurs achieve sustainable growth and personal fulfilment through tailored mentoring, coaching, and strategic support, to scale and grow their business while stepping away from day-to-day operations and avoiding burnout. I have been running my own businesses since the age of 26 (1996), though I only started mentoring and coaching as a business in 2018, after suffering burnout in 2017.

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ECONOMY?

Economic difficulties influence how willing business owners are to invest in growth. With volatility pushing leaders to tighten cash, margins, and delivery during uncertain times, demand for mentoring rises as owners want coherent plans, better pricing discipline, and resilient operations. My role shifts toward helping clients build resilience, adapt, and find new opportunities. So I focus them on controllables and scenario plans rather than headlines.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON HYBRID AND FLEXIBLE WORKING – IS IT STILL NEEDED, OR PRACTICAL?

I think it is absolutely both needed and practical, as it is a measure of output, not chair time, which is outdated. Flexibility empowers people to do their best work and keeps top talent, widens the hiring pool, and allows for a better work-life balance. Though saying that, I still advocate in-person for key strategy and culture moments, with crisp meeting charters to avoid "Zoom drift".

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

AI is a powerful tool for productivity and insight, which is a force multiplier, but not a silver bullet. Having worked with AI since 2014, I have a good understanding of its uses and downsides, being an early adopter. We use it for several tasks as it aligns with the LPAD (Learn, Perfect, Automate, Delegate) methodology we discuss. It has been used to streamline admin, analyse business performance, and enhance the client experience, using it for things like diagnostics, content drafting, and lead qualification across our platforms. But our rule is "human judgement on the wheel, AI on the pedals", with strong data-ethics and client-confidentiality gates. We also believe that the human touch in mentoring will always be irreplaceable.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?

Supportive and trustworthy, being calm, straight-talking, commercially sharp and genuinely invested in their growth and wellbeing.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Listening deeply and creating measurable, clear, simple, and actionable plans from complex challenges. As well as holding teams (including the owner!) gently but firmly to account.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?

Connecting with business owners ready for change, those with the right mindset and commitment to growth, both personal and professional. Helping founders truly let go, to understand that delegation and systemisation feel risky until you experience the freedom they create.

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?

Seeing clients transform their businesses and lives to unlock new revenue and confidence, as they have stepped out of daily reactive firefighting of their business to grow or exit on their terms. Being able to build programmes that restore owners' time, health and wealth and sharing that journey on international stages to inspire others.

PET HATES?

Performative busy-ness, jargon that hides poor thinking and people not respecting others' time.



AI is a powerful tool, but Lee says the human touch in mentoring will always be irreplaceable



The adventures of Shackleton would make him a perfect dinner party guest



Lee Broders

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

Don't wait for the "right moment". Take action, trust yourself, ask for help sooner and build systems before scale.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?

Spending quality time with family and friends, riding motorbikes, writing and wellness.

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?

The sense of community and the stunning landscapes – you can't beat the mix of friendly people and beautiful countryside.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?

LinkedIn.

FAVOURITE MOVIE AND/OR TV SHOW?

I have so many that it is hard to pinpoint just the one, but a big fan of feel-good films and Walt Disney.

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?

Early bird, own your morning, own your day. My best ideas come with a fresh start to the day.

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?

Sir Ernest Shackleton, Sir Richard Branson, Warren Buffett, and my late grandfather.

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

Though I fly, have climbed and parachuted, I am not overly keen on heights.

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, PROFESSIONALLY AND PERSONALLY?

Professionally, I'm focused on helping more business owners achieve breakthrough growth as we grow Business Growth Global internationally. Personally, I'm aiming for even more balance, while continuing to grow the business and making time for family, wellbeing, and supporting veteran and local community initiatives.

Our People, Your Team.

Here to
help you.

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

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