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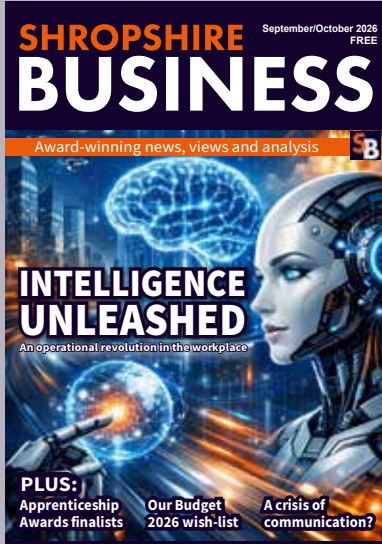
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MIDLANDS MEDIA AWARDS
Magazine of the Year – winner

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By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor



Have you tuned into our brand-new business podcast? We've teamed up with Shropshire Live to bring you news, views and in-depth interviews with some of the county's most fascinating business leaders.

Sponsored by two-time company of the year winner McPhillips, there's a new episode every fortnight... find us on the Podbean platform, or listen on shropshirebiz.com



SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

We make no apologies for going full Blade Runner with our front cover this time – because it strikes at the very core of several important stories in this issue.

Like the cult movie, Shropshire employers are exploring how technology's ability to 'think' is becoming an integral part of modern working practices. People often assume the trailblazing all happens in places like Silicon Valley... but Shropshire didn't earn its reputation as the birthplace of industry by accident.

Right here in the heart of the county, a forward thinking business has developed a new AI platform that early adopters believe could be genuinely game changing. It sits on top of the systems you already use, pulling all their information into a single intelligent hub. I sat down with the founders of Autm:ai at their Shrewsbury headquarters to find out more.

If there's one constant running through this issue, it's momentum. The pace of change in the business world has rarely felt as relentless, as energising, or as downright challenging as it does today.

But AI isn't the only force shaping the landscape this autumn. With a new Chancellor in place and the October Budget fast approaching, local businesses are watching closely – and they have a clear sense of what they want to see. In our Budget preview, we explore the priorities being voiced across a range of sectors: targeted support for SMEs, measures to boost investment, clarity on tax policy, and a commitment to long term stability after a turbulent period for the economy. See if you agree with their wish list. As always, readers should

confirm political details with trusted sources.

We're also turning our attention to a quieter but equally significant challenge unfolding inside many workplaces: communication. Specifically, whether there is a growing disconnect between how bosses and new employees speak, collaborate, and interpret the world of work. Our special report examines the cultural, generational, and technological factors shaping this divide. Are managers struggling to adapt their leadership styles to a workforce that communicates more informally and more digitally than ever before?

As ever, there's no shortage of good news for brilliant Shropshire businesses – from a huge defence contract to a multi million pound house building deal, and much more besides. Despite the uncertainties in the world right now, Shropshire businesses are still investing, still innovating, and still moving forward.

I'm very much looking forward to chairing a panel debate in the coming days on the health of our commercial property sector. If you'd like to be there, you'll find more details on page 20.

And on the subject of events, we're proud to bring you the finalists in this year's Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards.

Now in its third year, the competition has grown once again. We'll be gathering at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel on October 8 for a brilliant celebration of apprentices, their mentors, and their employers – and capturing everything with our Shropshire Business Live TV cameras.

Have you booked your ticket yet? All the details are at stwaa.co.uk.

Technology, policy, people... we may live in a world of great change, but they remain the vital ingredients in building and maintaining a happy, resilient, and productive business.

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Jon Simcock of Simcock Communications



Neil Phillips from Phillips Chartered Accountants



Ryan Bickham, managing partner at PCB Solicitors

New Chancellor... New Expectations?

What do Shropshire businesses want and expect from new Chancellor John Healey's first Budget?

John Healey has stepped into the Treasury at a moment of both anticipation and unease.

After years of economic turbulence, political turnover, and stubborn structural challenges, businesses across Shropshire are looking to the new Chancellor for clarity, confidence, and – crucially – action.

His first Budget on October 28 promises to be the opening statement of a new economic era, and local firms have clear views on what they believe it should contain.

The challenges facing Mr Healey are not small. He inherits sluggish productivity, tight labour markets, rising costs, and a business community that has grown weary of short-term fixes.

Not to mention an unpredictable and uneasy global economy, and a heap of extra challenges presented to many parts of the economy by this summer's heatwave.

Yet there is still optimism: many Shropshire leaders feel that a stable Government with a clear mandate could finally deliver the long-term strategy they've been asking for.

Perhaps the most repeated message from Shropshire's business owners is simple: stop the chopping and changing. From corporation tax adjustments to business rates relief, from apprenticeship levy tweaks to investment zone announcements, the past decade has been defined by policy volatility.

Businesses hate uncertainty – the backbone of Shropshire's economy – constant change has made long-term planning nearly impossible.

John Healey's first challenge is therefore political as much as economic: he must restore predictability. Shropshire employers want a Budget that sets out multi year frameworks, rather than one year patches. Manufacturers in Telford, food producers in Oswestry, and

professional services firms in Shrewsbury all say the same thing: stability is now a growth strategy.

Shropshire's productivity levels lag behind national averages, and businesses are keenly aware of it. Many point to infrastructure gaps such as transport, digital connectivity, and skills pipelines as the root causes.

The Chancellor faces pressure to accelerate investment in road and rail upgrades, particularly along the A5 corridor and links into the West Midlands – as well as a decision on whether the county's direct rail link to London should be restored.

He also needs to act on full-fibre and 5G expansion, essential for rural businesses that increasingly rely on digital operations. In spite of statistics which celebrate connectivity progress, we still remain the poor relation to urban areas.

Jon Simcock, who runs communications and PR consultancy Simcock Communications, believes the Government must use the Budget to ensure rural areas are not left behind in the rush towards devolution.

"If the Government is serious about growth in every postcode, it must recognise that rural economies cannot be ignored while all the money is allocated to big city mayors.

"Devolution can bring real benefits, but only if rural areas are given the tools to compete. That means fair funding, simpler recruitment rules and tax policies that reward people for taking the risk of running a business.

"Without that, we will end up with a two tier economy where cities accelerate and rural communities are left to cope with rising costs and shrinking opportunities."

Skills programmes – where some very productive work is being done in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin right now – also need to reflect real employer needs, not theoretical national targets, in the view of employers.

Local companies want the Budget to commit to long-term capital investment, not just pilot

schemes. They argue that productivity won't rise until the foundations are strengthened.

Energy bills, insurance premiums, supply chain costs, and wage pressures have all risen sharply. While many Shropshire firms support higher wages in principle, they say the cumulative burden is squeezing margins to breaking point.

The Chancellor must decide how to balance fiscal responsibility with targeted relief.

Business rates are right at the top of the list for Ray Hickinbottom of the Federation of Small Businesses. He says: "The threshold for small business rate relief has remained the same for the last 10 years but business properties have been re-valued three times in the last ten years.

"The Chancellor should also ensure that the Commercial Payments Bill becomes law as soon as possible because late payment causes big problems for small businesses."

Businesses also want incentives for energy efficiency, helping firms reduce long-term costs, and simplified tax reliefs, particularly for investment in machinery, digital tools, and automation.

There is also growing interest in a more flexible approach to National Insurance contributions for micro businesses.

Neil Phillips, of Phillips Chartered Accountants in Telford, says: "I would like the Chancellor to make it more attractive for employers to recruit staff by recognising it was a mistake to hike up employer's National Insurance costs – and reduce the employer's NI cost on businesses. I also think that youngsters are being priced out of the jobs market because the minimum wage for those over 18 is set too high and is putting off employers 'taking a punt' on recruiting a youngster who has no previous work experience."

Ryan Bickham, managing partner at PCB Solicitors, also wants the new Chancellor to review employers' National Insurance contributions.



Hollie Whittles of Purple Frog Systems in Telford

He says: "I feel it penalises businesses for employing people and seems counter-intuitive to the aim of boosting the economy, particularly for small shops and cafes that rely on more part-time employees.

"I am not opposed to taxation, but believe a greater focus on taxes linked to profitability, such as corporation tax, would be fairer and less likely to discourage job creation."

The new Government has spoken publicly about the need to support regional strengths. For Shropshire, that means advanced manufacturing, agri tech and food production, tourism and heritage sectors, green energy and environmental services.

Businesses want targeted investment zones, innovation grants, and export support tailored to these sectors. They argue that Shropshire's blend of rural and industrial assets makes it an ideal testbed for national growth initiatives.

The Chancellor faces pressure to accelerate investment in road and rail upgrades

Net zero remains a priority, but businesses want realism. Many support the transition but say they need clearer timelines, better incentives, and practical guidance.

Among the measures being suggested by Shropshire employers are the possibility of capital allowances for green upgrades, supporting local renewable energy projects, and funding low carbon transport infrastructure

Shropshire's rural economy is viewed as particularly sensitive to environmental policy, and firms want to see measures that balance ambition with affordability.

Hollie Whittles, director at Purple Frog Systems in Telford, says: "It would be good if the Chancellor removed inheritance tax on farms, brought forward business rates reform that accounts for rural businesses competing in smaller local markets, and funded rural broadband and mobile infrastructure investment – not just headline coverage stats.

"He should also make the combined authority framework fairer so all businesses can benefit from support and grants, not just a postcode lottery."

Craig Hughes, partner at office supplies specialist Chrisbeon, quotes Winston Churchill



Craig Hughes, partner at Chrisbeon

who said: "I contend that for a nation to try to tax itself into prosperity is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle."

Craig adds: "If businesses prosper, bonuses are paid, recipients benefit, goods get bought, dining out gets done, new cars and houses get bought – all of which incur taxation, so the treasury wins too.

"But by hiking taxation and penalising those that work hard without the prosperity element – for employers and employees alike – a nation is brought to its knees in my opinion."

Helen Columb, owner of Telford-based Turas Accountants, wants the new Chancellor to reverse the trend of recent Budgets and deliver meaningful support for owners of small businesses.

She says: "In the last two years, policy changes have made it more expensive to hire people and stripped away many of the tax advantages that recognised the risks and responsibilities of being a business owner.

"I know these changes have left many questioning whether running a company is still worth it. Owners are delaying hiring decisions or avoiding recruitment altogether because the cost of taking someone on has risen so sharply.

"Directors are often the last to be paid, and



Helen Columb, owner of Turas Accountants

many put thousands of pounds of their own money into keeping their businesses going. The small amount of tax efficiency they once had has been eroded."

Ruth Ross, chief executive of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, wants to see measures that reduce the tax burden on businesses 'in a way that actually encourages growth rather than stifling it'.

"Businesses across Shropshire are looking for a Budget that delivers stability, confidence and a clear long term plan for growth. Our members consistently tell us that they need certainty on energy costs, meaningful support with skills and training, and a tax environment that rewards investment rather than penalising it.

"We hope the Chancellor recognises that smaller firms in particular are still carrying the weight of inflationary pressures and rising operating costs.

"What we want to see this year is a Budget that backs enterprise. That means practical measures to ease the cost burden, unlock productivity and give companies the confidence to plan ahead.

"Shropshire businesses are resilient and ambitious, but they need the right conditions to thrive."

AT A GLANCE... WHAT SHROPSHIRE BUSINESSES WANT

- Reforms to Employers' National Insurance
- Meaningful support with skills and training
- Simpler recruitment rules
- Business rates reform
- Removal of inheritance tax on farms
- Greater focus on taxes linked to profitability
- Levelling-up of 5G and connectivity for rural areas
- Better incentives for net zero action
- Accelerated investment in road and rail upgrades



Another big defence supply contract boost for Telford

Defence equipment manufacturer Rheinmetall has secured another key contract for the British Armed Forces.

Among other items, the company will supply weapon systems for the British Army's RCH 155 wheeled howitzers – with its Telford site at Hadley Castle playing a pivotal role.

The exact value of the supply contract has not been disclosed, but the company confirmed it was 'in the low three-digit million-euro range'.

The RCH 155 wheeled howitzer is a product of ARTEC, which is a joint venture between Rheinmetall and KNDS Deutschland.

The UK has placed an order for 72 RCH 155 wheeled howitzers, and both countries are currently refining the remote-controlled weapon system.

Once the process is complete, Rheinmetall will supply a further 72 elevating masses and on-board tools.

The company said: "Additional non-recurring services will also be provided, such as support in preparing training materials and technical documentation. The weapon systems will be manufactured at Rheinmetall's new gun



The RCH 155 wheeled howitzer. Picture – KNDS

production facility in Telford, which is being taken into operation step wise."

Rheinmetall is one of the leading experts in 155 mm weapon systems, and is also one of the world's largest ammunition manufacturers. The company is currently expanding its production capacity significantly.

The RCH 155 combines the drive module

of the GTK BOXER wheeled armoured vehicle with an enhanced, fully-automated version of the weapon system used in the self-propelled Panzer howitzer 2000.

Its ability to fire while moving makes it one of the most advanced systems of its kind. The wheeled artillery system features an unmanned, fully-automated turret.



Jodrell Bank – operated by the University of Manchester – has lost its annual £2.8 million UK Research and Innovation grant and could close in 2028

Rescue deal would focus on landmark

The future of one of Shropshire's most recognisable landmarks has been thrown into doubt following a major funding setback for Jodrell Bank Observatory, the world famous centre of UK radio astronomy.

The 25 metre radio telescope at Knockin, near Oswestry, is part of e-MERLIN, a network of seven dishes across the country that feed data into Jodrell Bank's national facility.

Built in 1976, the dish has long been a striking feature of the rural landscape and a vital link in the UK's high resolution study of distant galaxies. But its continued operation is now uncertain after the observatory's funding was withdrawn.

Jodrell Bank, operated by the University of Manchester, has lost its annual £2.8 million UK Research and Innovation grant and could be forced to close its doors in 2028 if alternative funding cannot be found.

Scientists have described the decision as "heartbreaking" and said it could dismantle decades of world leading research. They are still hopeful that a rescue deal can be done.

North Shropshire MP Helen Morgan had previously written to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology highlighting the damage she claims these cuts could cause to both local expertise and the UK's global scientific standing.

"Science, innovation and technology are central to our economic growth and our place in the world. The UK has long been a global leader in astrophysics and discovery science, but that status is now under threat.

"I have heard directly from astronomers and from the Shropshire Astronomical Society about the devastating impact these cuts could have. Facilities like the telescope at Knockin are part of world leading research networks, which once lost, boast a capability that cannot be rebuilt.

"These proposals risk hollowing out the future of British science by driving away the very researchers we should be supporting – particularly early-career scientists.

"At a time when we face major global challenges and fierce international competition, this is precisely the wrong moment to cut investment in discovery science."

Telford-based Transicon, an automation and control specialist that has championed science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education across the region, wants the decision to be reversed.

General manager Jennifer Hughes has called the planned cuts short-sighted and explained how it risked damaging the UK's ability to attract and retain top scientific talent.

She said: "We just cannot afford to lose our best scientific minds to countries that are willing to invest in this kind of research.

"That is not a future any of us should be comfortable with. This is a facility that has been

at the forefront of global physics research for decades and has helped to develop scores of engineers and scientists."

Jodrell Bank, founded in 1945, pioneered radio astronomy and played a key role in monitoring Soviet missile activity during the Cold War. Its global significance was recognised in 2019 when it was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status.

If the facility is forced to close, it will directly put nearly 30 jobs at risk, but will also impact the estimated 3,000 researchers who work in partnership with the facility.

The funding cut forms part of wider reductions across astronomy, nuclear and particle physics over the next four years.

UK involvement in the James Clerk Maxwell Telescope in Hawaii will end, upgrades to the Large Hadron Collider will be scaled back, and contributions to instruments on the Extremely Large Telescope in Chile have been withdrawn.

e-MERLIN is an array of radio telescopes, including the Knockin site, spanning 135 miles across Great Britain connected by a superfast optical fibre network to its headquarters at Jodrell Bank Observatory.

It has a unique position in the world with an angular resolution comparable to that of the Hubble Space Telescope.

This is not the first time the future of the Knockin transmitter has been called into doubt over funding. In 2008 it was secured thanks to a deal between the University of Manchester and the Science and Technology Facilities Council.

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Expanding footprint

Shrewsbury-based Millennium Wealth Management has announced the acquisition of The Protectors Financial in a move to expand its footprint across Shropshire.

Protectors director Dan Harris officially joins Millennium Wealth Management, bringing experience in mortgage and protection services, and as part of the transition, the company will be rebranded as The Mortgage Centre.

The business has recruited four new members of staff and taken over two additional offices in Suffolk to support growing demand. Alongside growth in the East of England, bosses say they are also 'exploring opportunities for a prominent town centre location in Shrewsbury' to complement the base at Oxon Business Park.

Neil Baker, managing director of Millennium Wealth Management, said: "This is a significant milestone for the company. Our aim is to become a leading provider of financial services in the region, offering clients expert support across mortgages and protection. It's a very exciting time for the business."



Milissa Chesters (left) receives the award from Thomas Telford School



Mike Hoban and Rhys Morgan of iconsys with Jeroen Baas (centre) from Tebulo Robotics

Strategic partnership

Telford-based industrial automation specialist iconsys has signed a strategic partnership agreement with a global robotics expert – as well as winning an award for its links to education.

The Stafford Park-based company has committed to working with Tebulo Robotics to accelerate the use of advanced robotic automation solutions across heavy industry.

It will see the two parties combine controls, automation and machine safety expertise with decades of robotic systems' experience to deliver robotic cell solutions for applications, including automated destrapping and coil handling, blade coating, dross removal, and integrated marking and labelling systems.

"We recognised very quickly that there was a strong alignment between our two businesses,"

said Andy Bunce, technical sales director at iconsys. UK industry has historically been slower to adopt robotics than many European competitors, but manufacturers are now facing increasing pressure around productivity, labour availability, safety and operational resilience."

The two companies believe there is significant potential for this partnership and have already started to collaborate on a major automation project for a leading UK steel manufacturer.

Meanwhile, iconsys has also been named Employer of the Year by Thomas Telford School for its 'exemplary dedication to school engagement'.

Milissa Chesters, head of people and culture, said the award meant a great deal to the company: "We believe in creating opportunities that inspire young people, bridge the gap between education and industry and showcase the exciting careers available in engineering, manufacturing and technology."

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Understanding AI: New short, flexible training units

Telford College is working in partnership with local data and AI analytics company Purple Frog Systems to launch new degree-level training units on Artificial Intelligence.

The Government has launched a range of short, flexible Level 5 units that employers can access through the Growth and Skills Levy.

They're designed for people already in work who want to develop specific skills without committing to a full apprenticeship. Each unit includes around 30 hours of learning, and is fully-funded for employees through the Growth and Skills Levy.

Beckie Bosworth, Telford College's director of employer engagement and partnerships, says: "There are many different units available across multiple sectors under this programme, but we are planning to start with **AI Leadership - AI Strategy and Opportunity** because of the level of interest we're seeing from employers.

"Before we launch it, though, we are seeking feedback from local employers to help us shape the programme and ensure it meets their workforce development needs.

"Our plan is to launch this level five programme in November, and we're keen to hear from as many employers as possible, to help us understand their preferred delivery arrangements."

● Scan the QR Code here to take part in a quick five-minute survey about the new AI training plans.



Unlocking workforce potential New apprenticeship incentives for local employers

Telford College is helping employers to recruit fresh talent, bridge skills gaps and develop the next generation of workers with a new-look package of apprenticeship incentives.

With up to £6,000 of financial support available, the college's Business Solutions team is encouraging organisations of all sizes to take advantage of new funding streams that make hiring apprentices more accessible and cost effective than ever.

For many employers, these incentives could be the catalyst for expanding teams, investing in future skills, or supporting young people into meaningful long term careers.

There is currently a £1,000 hiring incentive available to all employers who recruit apprentices aged 16-18, or those aged 19-24 with an education, health and care plan or care leaver status.

SMEs can also benefit from an additional £2,000 incentive when hiring new apprentices aged 16-24 – a significant contribution towards onboarding and training costs at a time when many smaller businesses are working hard to grow sustainably.

There is further support for employers who recruit young people facing barriers to work. Companies hiring candidates aged 18-24 who have claimed Universal Credit for more than six months may be eligible for a Youth Jobs Grant



Beckie Bosworth

of up to £3,000, helping businesses open doors for those who need it most while strengthening their own talent pipelines.

But the financial incentives are only part of the picture. Telford College's apprenticeship offer is built around a comprehensive support

model that makes the process straightforward, flexible and genuinely aligned to employer needs.

Beckie Bosworth says: "We currently have some fantastic candidates in our talent pool who are actively looking for apprenticeship opportunities.

"Financial incentives for employers are significant. For example, Construction businesses can access CITB grants for apprentices, and benefit from no National Insurance contributions for eligible candidates.

"Businesses partnered with us benefit from dedicated employer support, recruitment and candidate matching, expert guidance throughout the apprenticeship journey, and training delivery shaped around real world industry requirements."

The college also provides a wider suite of business services – from online learning and bespoke training programmes to consultancy, industry placements, employer hubs and room hire – ensuring organisations can access the right support at every stage of their development.

Beckie adds: "For employers looking to boost productivity, address skills shortages or invest in long term workforce development, these new incentives represent a timely opportunity.

"Apprenticeships remain one of the most effective ways to recruit motivated talent, upskill existing staff and build a resilient future ready team."

To explore the full range of funding and support available contact the Telford College Business Solutions team: BusinessSolutions@telfordcollege.ac.uk or call 01952 642452.



The judging and shortlisting panel

Celebration of success beyond the classroom

A stellar line-up of finalists has been revealed for the 2026 Shropshire Telford & Wrekin Apprenticeship Awards.

The event celebrates the brightest apprentices in the area, as well as recognising employers for their support of apprenticeship programmes.

Three Telford-based companies – Hoshizaki Europe, Housing Plus Group, and McPhillips – are shortlisted in the large employer category.

The medium sized employer finalists are ABC Day Nursery from Telford, iconsys of Telford, and Shingler Group from Myddle.

In the small employer category, the three finalists are AR Manley & Sons from Rodington, Priorslee Motor Services of Telford, and Ruby Vehicle Services at Pennerley.

Finalists in the individual categories come from all corners of the county. Categories include construction, health & social care, engineering & manufacturing, IT & digital industries, creative & media, and business legal & finance.

There are two new categories for 2026 – a ‘rising star’ award and a ‘mentor of the year’ prize.

In addition to the individual and employer categories, an overall star apprentice for both the Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin areas will also be crowned on the night.

Last year’s Telford & Wrekin winner was Agata Serafin from Elite Precast Concrete in Telford, while the Shropshire champion was Honor Davies of construction firm SJ Roberts.

Tickets are now on sale for the awards night, which includes a drinks reception and three-course meal. It will be held at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel on the evening of October 8. For all the details, see stwaa.co.uk

The competition is backed by some of the



Last year's winners celebrate at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel

county’s biggest and best names, led by headline sponsor Telford College, and supported by the Marches Careers Hub.

Other category sponsors include In-Comm Training Services, J&PR, Keele University, McPhillips, Pave Aways, iconsys, Purple Frog Systems, Shrewsbury College, ABP, and Housing Plus Group.

The media partner for the event is Shropshire Business Live TV, which will be filming and streaming the awards presentations once again this year.

Mark Allsop of Baxter Production, part of the organising team, said: “We had a record number

of entries again this year, and the quality and volume of entries surpassed all expectations.

“The judges said they faced a very difficult task narrowing down each category to just three finalists – and it will be even harder choosing the winners.

“We’re absolutely delighted with the response to the awards in this third year, and are now really looking forward to another fantastic awards evening.

“It’s going to be a fabulous celebration of the brightest and best apprentices in the county, as well as the businesses which go the extra mile to support the next generation of skilled staff.”



Agata Serafin and Honor Davies were the Telford & Wrekin and Shropshire apprentices of the year for 2025



Chris Field from headline sponsor Telford College talking to Shropshire Business Live TV at the launch

The finalists, their employers, and training providers



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BOOK YOUR TICKETS FOR THE AWARDS NIGHT:

Tickets are now on sale for the awards night, which includes a drinks reception, three-course meal and entertainment. It will be held at the Mercure Telford Centre Hotel on the evening of October 8. For all the details, see stwaa.co.uk

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Commitment to helping the young



Craig Howard of ANTA Education

Telford-based ANTA Education has won the Rising Phoenix Award for Alternative Education Provider, recognising its commitment to helping young people and adults build confidence, develop practical skills and move towards employment.

Founded and led by managing director Craig Howard, the independent training provider specialises in employability training, life skills courses and alternative provision pathways for young people who struggle within mainstream educational settings.

The Rising Phoenix Award holds particular significance following an especially difficult period for businesses, including the ANTA team which Craig says has experienced ‘serious setbacks’ over the past few months.

“The metaphor of the rising phoenix is something all businesses aspire to, and it massively resonates with me. We’ve had to remove staff, leave premises, and wind back certain things. This award feels like recognition of that journey of rising again.

“What keeps me going is that deep down knowledge that what we’re doing is right and that we can make a real impact on people’s lives. I also have this belief that we’re going to win. I think all businesses need that. You’ve got to believe you’re going to succeed, otherwise you’ll stop. That combination of purpose and quiet determination has carried me through the setbacks.”

Is your company 'AI ready'?

A Telford IT company has launched a new service to help local organisations understand how prepared they really are for the fast moving world of artificial intelligence.

Bespoke Computing Ltd, based at Stafford Park, is offering a new ‘AI Readiness Assessment’ to help identify opportunities, risks and practical next steps for adopting AI safely and effectively.

It poses more than 50 questions examining how AI impacts business strategy, technical controls and data hygiene – covering topics such as data quality and governance, cyber security and access controls, staff skills and AI literacy and compliance readiness.

The responses are then used to create a bespoke report and roadmap with recommendations to help harness the power of AI confidently, avoid unexpected costs, and get a real return on investment.

Bespoke Computing managing director Chris Pallett said: “With Microsoft announcing a move to usage-based billing for some AI tasks, we can expect others to follow. The age of free or low-cost AI looks to be coming to an end.



Chris Pallett (left) is offering a clear, honest picture of where businesses stand on AI

“AI is reshaping how organisations operate, make decisions and serve their customers. But many businesses don’t yet have the clarity or confidence to take full advantage, or understand the risks.

“Our AI Readiness Assessment gives businesses a clear, honest picture of where they stand today, and what they need to do to move forward responsibly. If we go into this new era blind, we should expect shock bills... and worse.”

He added: “We are passionate about helping businesses to ensure they have the right guardrails in place to use AI safely and with confidence.

“Every business is different. Some are ready to implement AI tools immediately, while others need to strengthen their foundations first. What matters is having a roadmap that’s realistic, safe and aligned with your goals – not just chasing the latest trend.

“AI can deliver huge benefits, but only when it’s introduced in the right way. Our role is to help local businesses cut through the noise, understand what’s possible, and make informed decisions that support long term growth.”

Bespoke Computing Ltd has been helping businesses work smarter and more securely since 2003. It provides fully-managed IT support, strategic advice, data back-up and recovery planning and cyber security protection.

Property business has moved on up

A Wem estate agency has moved into new premises in the town to accommodate its growing business.

Welch Estate Agents, owned by brothers Callum and Tom Welch, was launched in early 2024 from an office in Maypole Court and has relocated to larger premises in Talbot House.

Callum, who lives in Wem, acquired the agency from previous owner John Stokes and quickly established the business supporting North Shropshire residents with home sales, lettings and property management. He was joined by brother Tom early this year as co-owner.

Before opening the agency, Callum gained a degree in Real Estate Management from Liverpool John Moores University where he also achieved accreditation to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors. Following his degree, he worked in residential and commercial property agencies in Manchester and Shropshire. Tom previously worked in sales.

Callum said: “I’ve been overwhelmed by the support I’ve received from the local community since I opened the agency. Tom and I grew up in Weston-under-Redcastle and went to school in Wem, so we have lots of connections with people who live in the local area. This has really helped us to progress the business.

“Having outgrown the office we had in Maypole Court, we took the opportunity to move into Talbot House which is more spacious and provides plenty of room for expansion.

“Also joining us in the new office is experienced lawyer Ffion Thomson, who provides conveyancing, will writing and Lasting Power of Attorney services for clients.

“While the current economic situation is challenging for all of us, we are having a very positive year, both with sales and lettings.”

Both Callum and Tom were educated at Thomas Adams School and Shrewsbury College of Arts & Technology.



Callum and Tom Welch of Welch Estate Agents



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Building the future workforce: why employer engagement matters more than ever



When we talk about economic growth, the focus often falls on investment, infrastructure and productivity. All matter. But long-term prosperity depends on something more fundamental: people.

Across Shropshire, Herefordshire and Telford & Wrekin, employers continue to tell us how difficult it can be to recruit and retain the right skills. Workforce needs are changing quickly. Competition for talent is growing. In many sectors, the challenge is no longer only about filling today's vacancies, but about building the workforce businesses will need.

That work begins long before a job advert is written. It starts when young people are still in education, forming ideas about their future and discovering what opportunities exist around them. This is where the Marches Careers Hub plays such an important role.

The Marches Careers Hub works with schools, colleges, employers and local partners to strengthen the link between education and employment. Its aim is simple: to help every young person access meaningful careers education and workplace experiences, so they can make informed choices about their future.

This matters because the labour market young people are entering looks very different from the one many adults would recognise. New industries are emerging, technology is transforming existing roles and employers increasingly require a blend of technical expertise and essential workplace skills.

Without regular contact with employers, many young people do not know what is available on their doorstep. They may not see the range of careers offered by local businesses or understand the routes into them through apprenticeships, technical qualifications, further training or employment.

Employer engagement helps close that gap and introduce young people to what is possible.

When businesses work with schools and colleges, they bring careers to life. They can talk about their sector, host workplace visits, offer work experience, support careers events or mentor young people. These encounters provide insight that a classroom alone cannot offer. They help young people understand not



Enterprise Advisor Ian Cross assists students at a Careers Hub Digital Skills event at Telford College



Enterprise Advisor Catherine Armstrong from CA Consultancy with students

just what jobs exist, but the skills, behaviours and attitudes needed to succeed in them.

A single conversation with an employer can change how a young person sees their future. It can challenge assumptions, raise aspirations and expose young people to sectors they may never have considered – from advanced manufacturing and engineering to construction, digital, healthcare and professional services.

Schools and colleges cannot prepare young people for the workplace in isolation

The benefit is not one-way. Employers gain from being involved. By engaging with the Marches Careers Hub, businesses help to shape the future talent pipeline rather than react to skills shortages once they have emerged. They can explain what their industry needs, promote local career pathways and build links with communities.

Businesses that take part in careers education also tell us it helps them meet social value commitments, strengthens

their community profile, and offers valuable development opportunities for staff. Colleagues who mentor or support young people frequently gain confidence, leadership skills and renewed pride in their organisations.

This partnership approach is especially important in our region. If we want more young people to access local opportunities, and more employers to find the talent they need, education and industry must work together. Schools and colleges cannot prepare young people for the workplace in isolation. Employers cannot expect the education system to understand changing workforce demands without sharing their insight.

The Marches Careers Hub makes these connections easier. Whether you are a small business, a growing enterprise or a major employer, there are practical ways to get involved that reflect your time, capacity and expertise.

My message to employers is straightforward: your knowledge, experience and insight matters. By supporting careers education, you are not only helping young people make better decisions. You are investing in your future workforce, influencing the skills pipeline and helping to build a more resilient local economy.

Together, we can ensure more young people are inspired by local opportunities, more businesses can access the skills they need, and our region is better prepared for the future.

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

Social housing is on the way

Housing Plus Group has secured £6.4 million from the West Midlands Combined Authority to support the delivery of more than 200 new social rent homes in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

The Shropshire-based firm has secured funding through the WMCA's Social Housing Accelerator Fund. The fund supports housing providers to increase access to social housing and help meet the growing demand from people in need of secure, affordable homes.

The grant will support four developments in Shrewsbury, Gobowen and Wellington, including 76 apartments for people aged 55 and over at William Farr House in Shrewsbury.

Wayne Gethings, group chief executive at Housing Plus Group, described it as 'a major boost for Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin' and said it demonstrated the strength of the company's partnership with Mayor Richard Parker and the authority.

"This investment will enable us to deliver 205 much-needed social rent homes and ensure more local people can access safe, secure and affordable housing.

"We're committed to attracting investment that benefits our communities, and this funding will have a lasting impact on people and places across the region."

Over the next five years, Housing Plus Group plans to deliver 3,500 new affordable homes across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Staffordshire, creating more housing choice and places people are proud to call home.



William Farr House in Shrewsbury

Earlier this summer Housing Plus Group was named one of the Top 50 Biggest Builders in the country in an annual survey published by Inside Housing, climbing nine places to 23rd.

Providing homes and services to around 70,000 people across 33,000 homes in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Telford & Wrekin, Housing Plus Group was recognised in the annual ranking of housing associations based on the number of homes delivered in 2025-26.

During the year, Housing Plus Group spent £148.6 million on building new homes and improving existing ones.

Wayne said: "We are proud to be a significant regional housing provider with a truly local focus. By working exclusively in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Telford & Wrekin, we combine the reach and impact of a large organisation with a place-based understanding of the communities we support."



Chief executive Wayne Gethings

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A crisis of confidence?

Are young people really lacking workplace-ready communication skills – or do employers now have unrealistic expectations? ADAM PRINGLE weighs up the evidence

Young people in Shropshire are entering the workplace at a moment of profound transition. Employers across the county are continually voicing concerns about communication, resilience, and readiness.

Meanwhile, many young people feel they do have the skills to succeed, yet are frustrated by what they see as outdated expectations or inconsistent support.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of that argument, the result is a widening perception gap: a “crisis of confidence” that may not lie solely with young people, but within the relationship between modern staff and the workplaces they are entering.

So are employers simply struggling to adapt to a new generation whose expectations, behaviours, and communication styles differ from those of previous cohorts?

Let’s look at the evidence. A landmark report from the Chartered Management Institute found that just six per cent of UK managers believe young recruits are ready for work, despite nearly half of Gen Z believing they already have the skills they need.

This mismatch is not just about technical ability. Managers say the biggest gap is resilience, with more than 90 per cent reporting that this deficit is affecting performance. Communication skills, workplace behaviours, and early leadership capability also feature prominently in employer concerns.

These findings echo broader research into essential workplace skills. The Skills Builder Partnership highlights communication, collaboration, self-management, and problem-solving as core competencies – yet educators and employers struggle to agree on how these should be taught, assessed, or demonstrated.

In Shropshire, employers frequently report that young people struggle with speaking confidently to customers or colleagues, handling difficult conversations or feedback, understanding workplace etiquette, and managing time, priorities, and self-motivation. For some of them, the thought of having to pick up a telephone and speak to someone is terrifying.

These concerns are not new, but they do appear to be intensifying.

At the same time, young people disagree with the oft-quoted narrative that they are under-prepared, and they are certainly not lacking ambition. The same CMI research shows that almost two-thirds of young people actively want to progress into management or leadership roles, and confidence-building is a top priority for them.

Many feel they are ready, but complain that employers misunderstand their communication style or fail to provide the support structures they need.

Young professionals in Shropshire are seeking opportunities to build networks, develop communication skills, and grow their confidence – and there are a growing number of platforms offering them just that chance.

This is not about hand-holding – it is about giving young people the tools to succeed

Events such as Shropshire Chamber’s Young Professionals networking evenings, and the Shropshire Rising Professionals group organised by Aaron & Partners and Azets, are designed specifically to help people at the start of their careers to build connections and confidence in a relaxed environment.

WR Partners is also launching its new Shropshire Young Professionals in the coming weeks with a summer social at its base on Shrewsbury Business Park on September 17, from 4pm to 6pm.

The informal networking event is designed for 18–30-year-olds from across Shropshire who are looking to connect with other ambitious young professionals in a relaxed and welcoming setting.

The team says: “No presentations, no pitches, and no pressure – this is, just an opportunity to unwind after work, make new connections, and be part of Shropshire’s growing young professional community.”

Feedback from groups such as these



show that young people in Shropshire are not complacent. Far from it: they want to learn, progress, and contribute. But are they receiving the right guidance at the right time?

Let’s start with changing communication norms. Gen Z communicates differently. They are digital natives, accustomed to rapid, informal communication, often via messaging platforms rather than face-to-face dialogue.

Employers, however, may expect more formal communication, greater assertiveness in meetings, traditional professional etiquette, and confidence in phone-based or in-person interactions. This mismatch can easily be misinterpreted as a lack of confidence, when it may simply be a difference in communication culture.

Another factor is the transition from education to work. CMI’s research describes this transition as “broken”, with structural challenges affecting both young people and employers.

Many young people leave education without meaningful workplace experience, while employers often lack the time or resources to provide structured onboarding. Here in Shropshire, this is something that our further education colleges are working hard to address.

Youth Employment UK’s national benchmark report reinforces this, noting that more than one million young people are NEET, and that employers need clearer pathways, better partnerships, and more practical infrastructure to support early careers.

Without consistent preparation, young people may enter the workplace unsure of expectations – and employers may assume this uncertainty reflects a lack of confidence.

Managers themselves are also part of the equation. A striking insight from CMI’s research is that 86 per cent of young people believe it is important that their line manager has received training on how to support someone at the start of their career.

Have you, or any of your line managers, received or even contemplated reaching out for



Shropshire Chamber’s Young Professionals group is growing

help in coaching, mentoring, or developing young talent? Excellent operational leaders sometimes lack the skills to nurture early-career staff who need structured guidance, reassurance, and clear expectations.

This can create a feedback loop: a young person feels unsupported, their confidence drops, the manager interprets this as lack of readiness, expectations rise, and the relationship quickly becomes strained.

Complicating matters further is the reality that the workplace has changed dramatically, but expectations have not. Today’s Shropshire economy is more complex, more hybrid, and more emotionally demanding than ever.

Young people are entering environments where communication happens across multiple channels, remote work reduces informal learning, customer expectations are higher, and workplaces are more diverse and multi-generational. Yet many employers still expect young recruits to demonstrate traditional behaviours from day one: resilience, initiative, and polished communication. This expectation may be unrealistic without structured development.

Shropshire’s business community is uniquely

positioned to address this crisis of confidence. Employers, educators, and networks already collaborate closely, and there is strong appetite for building clearer pathways into work.

Local initiatives – from Chamber or FSB networking events to employer-led workshops and school partnerships – show that confidence can be built when young people are given the right environment to practise communication skills and develop workplace behaviours. But the challenge remains: how do we close the gap between what young people have and what employers expect?

Several actions could help strengthen confidence and communication skills among young people while also aligning employer expectations with modern workplace realities. Employers should invest in pre-employment experiences such as workplace visits, shadowing, short-term projects, and mentoring schemes.

These give young people a chance to practise communication in real settings, reducing anxiety and building familiarity. Youth Employment UK’s benchmark highlights the value of “Explore” and “Experience” activities in preparing young people for work.

Confidence also grows when expectations

are clear, so employers should provide structured onboarding and early-career support, offering detailed induction programmes, setting out communication norms explicitly, providing regular feedback, and pairing young recruits with trained mentors. This is not about hand-holding – it is about giving young people the tools to succeed.

Training front-line managers is equally important. Managers are the single biggest influence on early-career confidence, and young people value managers who are trained to support them. Investing in coaching skills, communication training, and youth development can transform workplace culture.

Employers should also recognise that communication styles evolve. Rather than expecting young people to immediately adopt traditional norms, workplaces can teach professional communication explicitly, encourage safe spaces for practising presentations or customer interactions, and blend digital and face-to-face communication training.

This helps young people adapt without feeling judged. Finally, employers should celebrate ambition and potential. Young people are not lacking ambition. They want to progress, lead, and contribute. Employers who recognise this – and provide pathways for growth – will build confidence naturally.

So, is there a crisis of confidence? Yes – but maybe not in the way it is often portrayed.

Young people are not entering the workplace devoid of confidence or communication skills. They are entering workplaces that have changed dramatically, with expectations that are not always clear, consistent, or aligned with modern communication norms.

The real challenge going forward is alignment: between education and employment, between young people’s communication styles and employer expectations, and between the support young people need and the training managers receive.



Applegreen Service Station in Salop Road, Welshpool



The Haughmond at Upton Magna is back in business

Opportunities galore

The commercial property landscape in the Shropshire area will be explored at a major event in Shrewsbury.

Halls Commercial is hosting an evening get-together called 'The Commercial Property Advantage 2026: Yield, Stability & Opportunity' at its offices in Battlefield from 5.45pm to 7.45pm on September 16.

It is being hosted in partnership with Barclays Private Bank, Rightmove, Azets and Shropshire Business and Rowton Vineyard.

This event brings together investors, business owners and property professionals for an evening of expert insight, discussion and networking.

James Evans, head of commercial at Halls, said: "Throughout the evening, you'll hear from leading industry experts as they explore the commercial property landscape and discuss the opportunities and challenges ahead.

"The programme includes keynote talks, an interactive panel discussion and practical insights."

Topics on the agenda include:

- The commercial property outlook for 2026
- Investment strategies to maximise yield and long-term rental stability
- Tax planning and financial considerations relating to property
- Funding options and lending insights
- Regional and national commercial property trends and forecasts

Following the presentations, the conversation will continue over locally-produced wines from Rowton Vineyard, food and refreshments, and networking with investors and property professionals.

James will deliver closing remarks at the event, and run delegates through some case studies highlighting activities and trends over the past few months, while Shropshire Business editor Carl Jones will chair a panel debate with the keynote speakers.

It has been another busy time for Halls Commercial, which secured a new tenant for a popular Shropshire country pub just ten days after it closed.

The Haughmond in Upton Magna announced its closure due to rising hospitality costs on social media in June, but is now back in business.

James said he was delighted that a tenant



The former Shropshire Chamber base at Henry Close, Battlefield



Jame Evans, head of commercial at Halls

for The Haughmond was found so quickly. "When news of the closure emerged, there was understandable concern about the future of the pub.

"To have secured a new tenant and completed a deal within just ten days is an exceptional result and sends a very positive message about the market against the national backlash of negativity.

"The speed of the letting comes at a time when much of the hospitality industry conversation has focused on the challenges facing pubs, restaurants and hotels.

"The successful agreement for The Haughmond highlights that, while operators continue to face economic pressures, there

remains significant appetite from experienced businesses seeking the right opportunities."

Other deals include the off-market sale of Applegreen Service Station in Salop Road, Welshpool, to a private property company for £925,000.

James said: "We were able to agree terms quickly for a sale, maintain confidentiality throughout the process and achieve an excellent disposal result for our client all within just ten days.

"It demonstrates the continued demand for well-positioned, roadside investment assets, particularly in the fuel retail sector, in strategic regional locations where buyer investor demand continues to outstrip supply.

"We were able to leverage our established relationships with active investors and operators to secure a swift sale while delivering a strong outcome for the vendor."

Another high profile deal in recent weeks was the sale of the former Shropshire Chamber of Commerce base in Shrewsbury to Reach for Inclusion.

The Henry Close building at Battlefield was put on the market when the Chamber made the strategic decision to centralise operations in Telford.

Halls Commercial sold the 4,682 square feet building, which was on the market for £400,000, after the new owners initially took it on a short-term lease.

Exciting times for accountancy firm

A well-known Shropshire accountancy practice with offices in Shrewsbury and Ludlow has been taken over by one of the UK's fastest growing professional services groups.

Thorne Widgery, which operates from Battlefield Enterprise Park in Shrewsbury and The Business Quarter in Ludlow, has joined DJH – a private equity backed group supported by Tenzing. The deal marks DJH's 22nd strategic expansion in just five years.

The move brings Thorne Widgery's long-established client base and award winning team into a national organisation with almost 900 employees and 19 offices across the UK and Ireland.

The company is now operating as part of DJH, bringing its established client base and innovative team into a group with national scale and an expanded suite of specialist services.

Scott Heath, chief executive of DJH, said: "Thorne Widgery has grown into the largest firm of accountants in Shropshire and Herefordshire, playing a critical role in supporting the vibrant business community in the region.

"They have built an award-winning practice – one with genuine depth of expertise, a team that truly cares, and a client base built on long-standing trust.

"What particularly excites us is the work its development team has completed in building software solutions for the academies sector. This is a real differentiator, and it opens up an exciting opportunity for us to explore how that capability could be extended into other sectors where DJH has strong expertise."

The local leadership is unchanged, with Daniel Crowther continuing to lead the Thorne Widgery team, alongside Lizzie Roberts and Sam King.

Daniel said: "This is a significant milestone for us. We have always



Scott Heath, Lizzie Roberts, Daniel Crowther and Sam King

believed that growth for our clients, our team and our business, requires investment, ambition and the right partners.

"DJH shares our values and our drive, and joining the group gives us the platform to go further and faster than we could independently. I am genuinely excited about what lies ahead."

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SHROPSHIRE BASED. GLOBALLY CONNECTED. FREIGHT FORWARD THINKING.

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- A textiles studio specialising in handmade products is relocating to south Shropshire from Cheshire. Elephas Handmade is set to open at Red House Farm, near Lydbury North. Suite 1A is to be transformed into an open studio and fabric shop, showcasing a range of cotton fabrics, haberdashery, handcrafted textile gifts and accessories. Elephas Handmade's owner Sally Hinze said: "I am delighted to be at this wonderful location with stunning surroundings, the perfect inspirational setting."
- A team of Mills & Reeve volunteers swapped the city for the countryside as part of the law firm's long-term biodiversity partnership with Small Woods Association. Four members of the firm's Birmingham office spent the day at one of Small Woods' woodland sites in Lightmoor, Telford, helping the organisation with selective bramble management – an important part of maintaining a healthy woodland ecosystem. Last year, Mills & Reeve announced a long-term biodiversity partnership with Small Woods Association as part of its 'Achieving more for nature's recovery' programme.
- A former Royal Shrewsbury Hospital nurse has traded her scrubs for an apron to launch a new, inclusive community friendly café aimed at tackling rural isolation and supporting those living with dementia. Kate's Cafe, at the busy Shotatton Crossroads between Oswestry and Shrewsbury, is the brainchild of Monica Sharma, who spent over a decade working in various roles in the NHS including serving as a surgical staff nurse and working in local nursing homes. After leaving the trust in November 2025, Monica decided to channel her clinical background and passion for care into a new venture that directly serves Shropshire's rural community.
- A new dedicated space for recording, editing and producing podcasts has opened at Meeting Point House in Telford, offering community groups, charities and small businesses a professional space to create high quality audio content and share their stories with the world. To support the launch and demonstrate how easy it is to set up your own podcast, Wayne Jenson, chief executive of Meeting Point House launched Meeting Point Matters – a podcast featuring inspiring conversations with the people making a difference across Telford and beyond.
- A new underground electricity cable has been laid beneath the River Severn as part of ongoing investment in the local electricity network. The work took place at Well Meadow, close to the Bridgnorth Bypass Bridge, where engineers used specialist directional drilling equipment to install a new 33kV cable beneath the river without the need for open-trench excavation. It forms part of a wider £12 million programme of investment in Bridgnorth's electricity network.
- An established Shropshire care company has moved into new offices at Shrewsbury's Oxon Business Park. Approved Care and Support Limited, whose headquarters are in Oswestry, has secured additional office space at Shrewsbury's Earlyworld House at Darwin Court as part of an expansion. The new premises will also be used as a training centre. Operations manager Sam Locke said: "The property came with two rooms and, after talking with the landlord, we have put up a dividing wall in the main office so we have in essence three offices here now."
- Rural housing association Connexus is investing £5.7 million in improving the energy efficiency of customers' homes as part of a wider £10 million, three-year programme. The investment focuses on bringing homes up to an Energy Performance Certificate rating of SAP C – a national standard for measuring energy efficiency. £3.2 million of the year's investment will be provided through Government funding from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and delivered in partnership with the Midlands Net Zero Hub.



Mills & Reeve volunteers at the Small Woods Association



Kate's Cafe at Shotatton is the brainchild of Monica Sharma, who is pictured with her husband

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Dena Evans, Josephine Laybourn-Aird, Hayley Jay and Amelia Redge

Reech and Reward recipient

Shropshire-based marketing agency Reech has named The Cavalier Centre as the recipient of its 2026 'Reech and Reward' initiative.

The charity, based near Much Wenlock, will receive dedicated marketing support worth £20,000 to deliver a complete rebrand, new website, and bespoke media content.

The centre, which provides life-changing equestrian-assisted activities, therapies and sport for disabled children and adults across the county,

was selected after a live pitch day at Reech's Shrewsbury headquarters, where shortlisted non-profits brought their vision and passion straight to the agency team.

Rob Hughes, founder and managing director at Reech, said: "This was hands-down our toughest round of Reech and Reward yet. We were blown away by the incredible work happening across Shropshire, but when The Cavalier Centre pitched, you could instantly feel their ambition."

Fantastic role model is celebrated at awards

A Telford apprentice who has learned 'to stand on his own two feet in a demanding industry' won one of the main titles at this year's In-Comm Training Awards.

Morgan Scott, from Forbo Flooring Systems, has built a host of practical and communication skills, embraced new opportunities and has been described as a fantastic role model for others.

The Advanced Apprentice has gone above and beyond to support a host of improvement activities and played key roles in projects such as the installation of energy efficient LED lighting.

The 15th annual In-Comm Training Awards drew the biggest crowd in its history, with 400 people celebrating the stars of vocational learning.

Executive director Bekki Phillips said: "Morgan was rightly announced as our Most Improved Learner of the Year for the way he has excelled at Forbo Flooring Systems and made a massive positive difference to the business."

"He is a great role model for others to follow and will undoubtedly encourage more young people to consider a career in engineering."

Shropshire was well represented in the winners' enclosure, with Rheinmetall BAE



Celebrations for Shropshire winners – Logan Stanton of Protolabs, Shanice Breeze from FBC Manby Bowdler, Morgan Scott of Forbo Flooring Systems, Amelia Jarrett and Jack Fallon (both from RBSL)

Systems' Jack Fallon and Amelia Jarrett winning the Apprentice Ambassador and Learner of the Year Business Support Awards respectively.

Logan Stanton of Protolabs took the Learner of the Year Advanced Telford title, with Schneider Electric's Ben Peate (Learner of the Year Foundation Telford) and Hyve Solutions'

Edina Mikosz (Learner of the Year Professional Services Telford) also picking up honours. Telford law firm FBC Manby Bowdler was named Large Employer of the Year.

Gareth Jones, managing director at In-Comm Training, said: "What an evening – and what a way to celebrate all the stars of vocational learning in one place."

Brewer sets sights on the second city

Independent Shropshire brewer Joule's has unveiled plans to transform a canalside pub in Birmingham into a new brewery tap.

The Market Drayton company acquired the building following the closure of Bistrot Pierre in the Gas Street basin, and has been running it over the past year as Waterside Tap.

It has been an opportunity to introduce the Joule's brand in the city – and over the coming months, the building will now be transformed into Gas Street Vaults, repositioning the building from a former restaurant into a traditional pub.

The design includes reclaimed materials, historic brewery artefacts, and carefully considered details will celebrate both Birmingham's industrial story and Joule's Shropshire brewing heritage.

Vicky Colclough, managing director of Joule's Brewery, said: "As an independent brewery, we have to be patient with projects like this. We save for them, we plan carefully and we only invest when we know we can do something properly."

"Spending the past year in the building has given us the confidence to move forward and create the pub we always believed it could become."

As an independent brewery, we have to be patient with projects like this. We save for them, we plan carefully

Georgia Charlton-Briggs, brand manager for Joule's Brewery, said: "Seeing Joule's beers being enjoyed beside Birmingham's canals over the past year has been incredibly rewarding."

Recruitment will begin shortly while the development is under way, with opportunities across management, kitchen and front-of-house roles. The new-look pub is expected to open in early 2027.

Pub is latest acquisition for portfolio

Punch Pubs & Co has added to its growing portfolio with the acquisition of The King's Head in Oswestry.

Head of acquisitions Andrew Cannons said: "This is a fantastic pub with strong local roots and a wealth of opportunities."

Punch Pubs operations manager Rachael Henry said: "This a brilliant pub that we will be relaunching in October."



The King's Head in Oswestry



Pictured: from left, Aico operations staff member Stuart Jones, Derwen College fundraiser Bryony Wesson, Derwen College learning support assistant Ryan Arrowsmith, students Louis, Owen and Liam, Aico operations staff member Jeremy Tinsley and Jane Pritchard

Encouraging support for local college

Horticulture students from Derwen College have been helping to maintain raised planters at Aico's headquarters in Oswestry.

The students, based at the Gobowen campus, have been tending the planters as part of their work experience, continuing a long-standing partnership between Derwen College and the home life safety company.

Students have previously helped Aico's grounds bloom as part of a flower bed project which contributed to the company winning a Best Commercial Premises award at the Oswestry in Bloom awards.

Jane Pritchard, Aico's corporate social responsibility and community engagement lead, said: "We value our partnerships with local charities and educational providers and are proud to support opportunities that give students meaningful work experience."

Derwen College fundraiser Bryony Wesson said: "This project is a brilliant example of how local businesses can support Derwen College students through practical, meaningful work experience."

"Aico's continued support helps our students build skills, confidence and independence in a real workplace setting."



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"It feels like we get a personalised service rather than a set plan off the shelf that would be generic or formulaic."



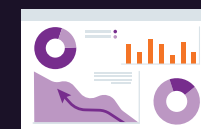
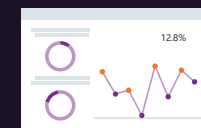
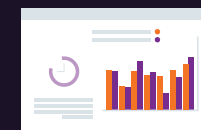
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Tutor George Hill with accountancy students at Shrewsbury College

Supporting Shropshire Businesses: Shrewsbury College celebrates exceptional AAT results

Shrewsbury College is celebrating exceptional results across its AAT Accountancy and Bookkeeping programmes, with students consistently outperforming national averages at Levels 2, 3 and 4.

The outstanding achievements highlight the crucial role professional qualifications play in developing the skilled finance workforce that businesses across Shropshire need to thrive.

Students studying AAT qualifications at the college achieved pass rates above UK averages across the majority of modules, with particularly strong performances at Levels 3 and 4.

Level 4 learners, many of whom are progressing into senior accounting and finance roles, exceeded national pass rates in every assessed unit, while Level 3 students achieved significantly higher success rates in key areas including financial accounting and tax processes for business.

The college also saw impressive high-grade achievement. At Level 3, 25% of learners achieved distinctions, compared with a national average of 14%, while more than half achieved merits. Level 2 learners secured a distinction rate of 41%, considerably higher than the UK average of 24%.

These results reflect the growing demand for professional upskilling within the

region, with many learners balancing their studies alongside employment and using their qualifications to progress within their organisations.

As businesses continue to face increasing financial, regulatory and commercial challenges, the need for qualified accounting professionals remains strong.

Through flexible pathways in Accountancy and Bookkeeping, Shrewsbury College is helping individuals develop industry-recognised skills while supporting employers to strengthen and future-proof their workforce.

Jane Owen, director of higher education and professional qualifications at Shrewsbury College, said: "These results demonstrate the commitment of our students, the expertise of our teaching team, and the value of professional qualifications in supporting local economic growth.

"We are delighted to see learners consistently outperforming national averages and progressing into rewarding careers within the finance sector.

"As employers continue to seek skilled accounting professionals, these achievements highlight the strength of the talent pipeline being developed here in Shropshire."

Applications are now open for September entry across AAT Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 Accountancy and Bookkeeping programmes, providing opportunities for individuals looking to start, develop or advance their careers in finance, as well as employers seeking to invest in the skills of their workforce.

Investing in your future finance talent

Shrewsbury College's AAT qualifications provide a practical route for both aspiring finance professionals and employers looking to build capability within their teams. To learn more about enrolment or workforce development opportunities, visit the Shrewsbury College website and speak to our team about the right programme for your business or employees.

A chance to influence the skills pipeline

Hollie Whittles



Every Shropshire business owner has an opinion about the skills gap. Far fewer are willing to trade that opinion for a seat in the room where it actually gets decided.

Ask any business owner in this county what is holding their growth back, and skills will come up before rent, before rates, before red tape. It's the one problem nobody seems short of an opinion on. What's rarer is finding people willing to sit in the room where those decisions get made.

For the past few years, I've sat as a governor at Telford College and served as an Enterprise Adviser with the Careers & Enterprise Company, alongside running Purple Frog.

I'd like to say I came to either role out of pure civic duty. Really, I came to them out of frustration, watching the same skills conversation happen at business breakfasts and industry panels, year after year, with nobody in that room having any actual say over what gets taught, how a curriculum gets built, or where employer input lands.

Governance isn't glamorous. It's the only seat at the table where a business voice gets to shape what the next generation of your employees actually learns, before they ever walk through your door.

It's budget scrutiny, safeguarding reports, and long meetings about capital projects that won't complete for three years. Nobody joins a board for the thrill of a curriculum review, but I've spent much of the last year in national conversations about AI skills policy, what employers need, what colleges can realistically teach, where the gap really sits – and I can tell you the theory only gets you so far. Sitting on a governing board is where you find out what's true on the ground.

Nowhere is that more urgent right now than AI. There's a real fear sitting in classrooms and staffrooms that AI will hollow out the jobs today's students are training for, and I don't



Annabel Hemingbrough and Hollie Whittles working with students from New Road and Telford Park schools at an employer-led digital skills workshop

think it's a fear worth waving away.

But the pattern I actually see in business isn't AI replacing people, it's people who've learned to use it well overtaking the people who haven't. That's true in accountancy, in marketing, in manufacturing, in sectors with no obvious 'tech' label on the door at all.

Essential digital skills – AI fluency included – now belong in every curriculum.

Why the boardroom matters here

Curriculum strategy doesn't get set in a vacuum; it has to answer to what local employers need and the direction the UK's industrial strategy is heading – and that strategy now has AI adoption written into it as a national priority.

A governor in the room can hold both of those in view at once, and push back when a curriculum review still treats AI literacy as optional rather than a baseline skill sitting alongside literacy and numeracy.

A full governor role isn't the only door in, either. Employer advisory boards, curriculum panels, and sector skills groups offer the same access at a lighter commitment.

Whichever route you take, the value runs both ways. The college gets a live, current read on what local employers actually need, and you get a say in whether the training on the table covers not just new entrants, but the upskilling your existing staff need to keep pace with how the work is changing.

That same partnership works just as well

outside the boardroom. Offering to give a talk to students, or opening up a work experience placement, does more than tick a box; it gives a young person a genuine look at what a career in your industry actually involves, at exactly the age their aspirations are still forming.

It also happens to be one of the more practical ways a business can help a school or college meet Gatsby Benchmark 4 'meaningful encounters with employers' without either side needing to reinvent the process to do it.

I won't pretend the commitment is small. A governor's role is a handful of meetings a year, plus the reading behind them – not something you can do half-heartedly between client calls. And the return isn't immediate. You don't walk away with a queue of ready-trained hires the following term.

What you get, over two or three years, is something more useful than that: real influence over whether your region's skills pipeline matches what your industry actually needs, and an early enough seat to do something about the gap such as an apprenticeship partnership, a guest talk, or simply making sure the careers advice a sixteen-year-old receives is grounded in today's job market rather than someone's assumption of it from a decade ago.

Shropshire has no shortage of capable business leaders with strong views on the skills gap. What it's short of is more of them willing to trade the opinion for the seat, or, at the very least, for an afternoon in front of a classroom.

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



An artist's impression of how the theatre could look on completion

Not too long to wait before treading the boards again

Plans have been submitted for an upgraded Telford Theatre design, paving the way for construction works to start this autumn.

Demolition of the former Oakengates nursery and auditorium opened up areas of the site that were previously inaccessible, allowing

further detailed investigations which have supported the new building design.

Plans now include a new-look entrance foyer and box office, larger community and rehearsal spaces, bigger bar areas and additional toilet facilities.

Ingredients specialist has recipe for further success

A food company near Oswestry has announced ambitious expansion plans which bosses say will shape the next chapter of its growth.

Middledale Foods, at Chirk, is a specialist ingredients company which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

It has pledged to invest across its operations, people and infrastructure to expand capacity, strengthen capability and support increasing demand from food manufacturers across the UK.

The strategy follows the strongest financial performance in the company's history, with Middledale Foods reporting record turnover of £31.2 million in its latest financial year.

Turnover has more than doubled and earnings increased by 133% over the last three years, exceeding targets.

Middledale Foods is targeting turnover of £52 million and pre-tax profits of £1.5m by the 2028 financial year

Managing director Sarah Summers said: "Every stage of our growth has been guided by a commitment to building a stronger business that continues to deliver for our customers and manufacturing partners.

"Through continued investment in people, systems, expertise and innovation, we're broadening our specialist ingredients offering and strengthening the capabilities that enable us to deliver innovative, partnership-led ingredient solutions and support our customers for many years to come."

Middledale Foods is targeting turnover of £52 million and pre-tax profits of £1.5m by the 2028 financial year.

Founded by Nigel Salsbury in 1996, the company was established to master the complex supply of bulk, short shelf-life dairy ingredients. It has since broadened beyond its dairy roots to provide a portfolio of dairy, egg, plant-based and functional ingredients.



Celebrations for Beaver Bridges at the UK's Bridge Awards

Proud moment for bridge design and build firm at industry awards

Shrewsbury-based bridge design and build contractor Beaver Bridges has been named Civil Engineering UK Bridge Contractor of the Year.

Widely regarded as the "Oscars of the bridge industry", the London-based Bridge Awards celebrate excellence, innovation and outstanding achievement across the UK's bridge engineering sector.

Henry Beaver and global business director Richard Hinckley accepted the award on behalf of the entire Beaver Bridges team.

Henry, the company's chief executive, said: "To be recognised as the Civil Engineering UK Bridge Contractor of the Year is an incredible honour.

"This award belongs to every member of the Beaver Bridges team whose hard work, dedication and commitment have made this achievement possible.

"We are immensely proud of what we have accomplished together and would like to thank our clients, partners and suppliers for their continued trust and support."



The company's partnership with Climbing Out dates back to 2023

Hike raises vital charity cash

More than 50 colleagues from Oswestry-based Aico swapped the office for the Shropshire Hills as part of a fundraising hike in support of a local charity.

They joined eight leaders from Climbing Out to take on a challenging 17km route across the Shropshire Hills.

It was an opportunity for Aico staff to experience first-hand some of the principles that sit at the heart of the charity's work: getting outdoors, getting active, connecting with others and taking on a challenge together.

Climbing Out supports adults who have experienced a life-changing injury, illness or trauma, using outdoor activities alongside personal development to help build confidence and resilience.

For Aico, the hike was the latest chapter in a relationship with the charity that began in 2023 and has included providing funding for vital outdoor equipment used across its programmes, plus supporting new branding for the charity's van and kit for its team of outdoor instructors.

Aico also supported Climbing Out with Breaking Waves – a documentary telling the extraordinary story of the Shropshire charity's founder, Kelda Wood MBE.



Aico staff on the 17km hike across the Shropshire Hills

Jane Pritchard, CSR and community engagement lead at Aico, said: "Their programmes make a real difference, helping individuals move forward with strength and purpose, and we're proud to continue supporting such an important cause."

Kelda Wood said: "It was fantastic to receive the active support of so many people from Aico. Our partnership with Aico is very important to us and has already had a huge impact on Climbing Out. We're incredibly grateful for their continued support and hope to keep building on the relationship into the future."

Aico has already raised around £4,000 in sponsorship for those who took part in the hike.

To donate to the Climbing Out charity, go to: www.justgiving.com/page/climbingout-aico-fundraiser

Exploring new developments



David Mermod

A specialist commercial and agricultural conveyancing CPD event is being held in Shrewsbury, bringing together legal professionals and industry experts to explore the latest developments in the sector.

The event, hosted by X-Press Legal Services Central, will take place at Hencote Vineyard on September 23, and features specialists including property law trainer Ian Quayle, agricultural property specialist Sarah Denney-Richards and Stewart Title's director of partnerships Robert Kelly.

David Mermod, director of X-Press Legal Services Central, said: "Shropshire has a strong agricultural heritage alongside a thriving commercial property market, making it the ideal location to bring together specialists covering both areas."

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There's a running joke in the Shrewsbury office of Autm.ai that its founding moment happened in a traffic jam on the M6. There's more to it than that, of course – but the story does contain an element of truth.

When Paul and Jeannie McGillivray pulled away from a business mastermind event in London late one evening, facing three and a half hours of motorway ahead of them, they had an idea that would consume the next 14 months of their lives... and potentially transform the way businesses harness artificial intelligence.

Jeannie recalls: "As we got into the car I said to Paul, we must be able to build some kind of platform for people who just want to speak into a tool or write into a tool and have it build the workflow for them, so all that background information and programming is automatic."

Paul reached for his laptop immediately... The McGillivrays are certainly not newcomers to the technology world. For nearly three decades they have run Remote – a custom software development company building systems for businesses of all shapes and sizes.

Paul is also the author of 'Scope To Scale', a guide for leaders seeking to harness the power of transformative software to lighten workloads and boost corporate momentum.

That accumulated experience gave them something rare: a deep, practical understanding of how organisations actually work – what Paul calls systems thinking.

"For more than 25 years we've been going into businesses, applying systems thinking processes, and we've seen what runs through every business, whether it's a solopreneur or a giant corporation," he says.

It was that insight – the certainty that universal patterns repeat across every business, whatever their size or sector – that gave the duo the confidence to build something genuinely new.

The seed of Autm was planted even before the motorway moment. Paul describes the point at which he decided enough was enough. As Remote's founder, he had long since stopped writing code; instead, his days were consumed by proposals, workshops, transcripts, scoping documents and system designs. A single proposal could take two weeks from start to finish.

"I was like, 'I'm done,'" he says. "I thought, surely I can build a suite of AI agents that does this for me. And so I did – and it turned that two week process into an hour."

Excited by this almost instant success, the couple shared what they had built with their mentor and friend Shaa Wasmund MBE, who has spent more than two decades building, backing and advising businesses, raising capital, and helping founders scale. She is currently a leading light in the new Zuffa Boxing movement, gaining strong traction on Sky TV.

Jeannie says: "She told us we needed to run a mastermind on this, because she felt it was incredible. She said it had the potential to change everything."

So they ran the mastermind – and the morning session showcasing existing AI tools was a big hit. But the afternoon, where the cohort was taught to build their own AI workflows using platforms like Lindy and n8n, was a disaster.

Delegates got lost. They missed steps. They didn't understand the context. By the end, they

Operational intelligence: The next level

Carl Jones meets the brains behind a potentially game-changing AI platform built in the heart of Shropshire



The Autm team at the official launch

were asking Paul and Jeannie a simple, revelatory question: "Can't we just pay you to do it?"

"I didn't know if this meant it was a great success or a terrible disaster," Jeannie admits. "But it told us the market didn't want to build AI workflows. It wanted the outcomes those workflows could deliver."

Autm was born. Over the past few months a small and select sample of employers have been helping to test the service, and it has now been fully unleashed.

At its core, Autm is an AI platform that sits on top of the tools a business already uses – email,

CRM, Stripe, PayPal, Google Drive, Slack and many more. It pulls all the relevant information into one central, intelligent hub. On top of that sits an AI agent you can speak to or type into, and beneath it runs a suite of automated workflows that carry out tasks on your behalf.

"Businesses have more software, more information and more communication than ever, but much of it remains disconnected," says Paul. "The aim is to reduce the cognitive load so you can get on with the bits you love about your business, not the admin."

So you can ask Autm what your profit looks

like on a specific project. Have it monitor your CRM for hot leads and Slack you if one looks promising. You can instruct it to take all the data from one CRM, migrate it to another, research each contact online, and flag any you haven't followed up.

Paul says: "A good example is if a lead comes into my CRM via a form on my website, it will go online, find out about that person, enrich the data, and Slack me if they're a good lead."

He says the philosophy behind the design is deliberately human. "Nobody cares about AI agents. People don't need AI agents. People need the outcome an AI agent can deliver. The opportunity with AI is much bigger than simply giving people another place to ask questions."

"When AI can securely understand the context that already exists across an organisation and work across the systems people use every day, it becomes capable of helping co-ordinate how work actually gets done."

As exciting as all this sounds, it's Autm's approach to data security that could prove to be the real game changer.

In a world where businesses are rightly sceptical of AI companies' promises about data privacy, the McGillivrays took a radical step: Autm redacts all personally identifiable information – names, email addresses, financial figures, project names – before any data is sent to a large language model.

"The agent never actually sees your personal data," explains Paul. "It just sees the patterns around the personal data. We don't know of

anyone who's tackled that and succeeded yet."

For law firms, accountancy practices, healthcare providers, and any business handling sensitive client data, the duo believe this single feature could make Autm uniquely adoptable where others provoke mistrust.

Jeannie continues: "Businesses have no shortage of software with the explosion of subscription based platforms, but they do have a shortage of any of them being joined up so their information isn't fragmented across them."

Nobody cares about AI agents. People don't need AI agents. People need the outcome an AI agent can deliver

"Important decisions are made in meetings, commitments are buried in emails, knowledge sits inside documents, spreadsheets and systems, and actions can easily disappear between one platform and another."

"We built Autm to connect all of that together. The ambition is to give an organisation

a layer of intelligence across the business that understands the context, remembers what is happening and helps people act on it."

She adds: "We're very proud that this has been built here in Shropshire. There is sometimes an assumption that ambitious technology companies have to be built in London, Silicon Valley or one of the major technology centres. They don't."

"We want to build something globally significant from Shropshire and help businesses here and elsewhere understand what this next generation of AI can actually do for them."

There is also a bigger political dimension to all of this. The recent episode of the US restricting access to one of its most powerful AI models – before quietly making it available again, but this time with a hugely inflated price tag – brings a degree of vulnerability to UK businesses.

"The fact that a country outside of the UK can cut us off from a core piece of technology is frightening," says Paul. "We want to bring that technology home, and we want to keep it home."

Their ambition is to build a Made in the UK platform that is also fully compliant with the EU AI Act, so businesses of any size can adopt AI without fear of geopolitical risk or regulatory exposure.

Jeannie says: "Shropshire was at the very heart of the last industrial revolution. It's only right that we should be playing a leading role in the next one. You don't need to be living in San Francisco or London to create amazing technology."

Listen to more of Carl's chat with Paul and Jeannie on the Shropshire Business podcast, available on the Podbean platform or at www.shropshirebiz.com

So, why do young people feel judged?



My teenage daughter has spent a couple of weeks on work placement at Global Freight Services this summer, so I asked if she'd like to guest write my column for this issue.

She chose a very topical subject: why the younger generation often feel judged by older colleagues in the workplace, especially when it comes to their use of, and reliance upon AI.

So these are not my opinions: they're the thoughts of 15 year old Zara Howarth.



Ageism is normalised in our generation. Older people often feel they have automatic superiority simply because they are older.

There are many misconceptions about younger colleagues... that they're lazy, entitled, or glued to technology – when in reality, younger workers can be highly motivated, collaborative, and adaptable.

Older people judge us for using AI, but the truth is that our lives can be busy and stressful. Sometimes we need a break, and having AI to help with homework when we're not feeling 100% is genuinely helpful. If I need support, I can ask AI and it gives me the right answer.

So why is that judged? Adults invented AI, so why wouldn't they expect us to use it?

Yes, there are serious consequences for using AI in coursework, but sometimes we're overwhelmed with extracurricular activities, multiple subjects giving homework, and constant expectations for both quality and quantity. Adults need to realise that AI can be a tool for good.

Everyone has their own struggles, and adults often assume they have more stress than teenagers. But teenagers experience stress too... especially academic pressure.

The pressure to achieve high grades from parents and teachers, combined with peer

pressure, the desire to fit in, and juggling friendships, can lead to emotional distress.

Family issues such as divorce, financial problems, or strained relationships at home can have a huge impact on a young person's wellbeing.

Body image concerns, puberty, and physical changes can make teens self conscious and increase stress levels too. Add the pressure of social media and constant judgement, and it's easy to see how emotional turmoil builds. Teen hormones can intensify emotions and affect mental health.

Judgement from parents, peers, and social media may even contribute to rising suicide rates among teenagers in the UK.

So why are adults judging younger people instead of recognising that times have changed? They should be checking in on their children – because you never truly know what someone is dealing with behind the scenes.

Adults are often shocked when their children lie to them, yet they lie all the time 'to protect us'.

But what exactly are they supposed to be protecting us from?

Every child has believed in Santa and other fantasy characters created by adults, but if you think about it, some of these ideas are quite strange. An old man sliding down a chimney into our house to give us presents? Adults say they lie to protect our innocence or to shield us from emotional pain.

Sometimes adults lie out of guilt, fear of consequences, or worry that they're not being the perfect parent. They may hide the truth to avoid overwhelming their children with adult issues.

But parents don't realise that these lies, even when well intentioned, can be harmful. So as children, why should we trust them?

It's time for the generations to stop judging each other and start understanding each other.

It's time for the older generation to embrace the younger generation's outlook on life – and for the younger generation to accept that sometimes, yes, someone older really does know best.

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

Spanish adventure gives Grace unique perspective

Lawyers from Shropshire and Spain have swapped offices as part of an international staff exchange that helps build closer links between legal firms across the globe.

Aaron & Partners took part in the latest IAG Global staff exchange with Valencia-based law firm Andersen, welcoming one of its lawyers to its offices before family law solicitor Grace Roberts joined the firm in Spain for a two-week placement.

Grace spent the fortnight working alongside colleagues in Valencia, learning more about the Spanish legal system, sharing knowledge with the Andersen team and experiencing life in one of the country's leading law firms.

She also immersed herself in Valencian culture, watching Valencia's footballers take on La Liga winners Barcelona, visiting the city's renowned Oceanogràfic aquarium and sampling plenty of authentic paella.

Grace said: "The exchange has been an incredible opportunity, both professionally and personally.

"Working alongside lawyers in another country gives you a real insight into a different legal system, but just as importantly it helps you build



Grace Roberts with María García Crespo in Valencia

connections that continue long after the exchange has finished.

"One of the biggest benefits is developing an international network of trusted contacts. If a client comes to me with a matter involving another jurisdiction, I now have trusted contacts I can turn to whenever a client needs legal advice internationally."

The latest exchange marks the fifth time Aaron & Partners has taken part in the IAG Global scheme, having previously partnered with firms in the United States, France, Germany and Belgium.

Expanding to new premises

An established Shropshire construction company has secured new warehouse premises at Shrewsbury's Harlescott Business Park as part of an expansion.

Groundwork contractors A & N Wardle Limited is a family-run business specialising in new builds, paving, drainage, landscaping and site preparation for both private and commercial projects across Shropshire and the surrounding area.

We have been looking for new premises and a new yard for a while

Director Adam Wardle said: "We are relocating to Harlescott from Shawbury Industrial Estate. We are expanding, so need more room to store our materials and machinery. We have been looking for new premises and a new yard for a while."

Josh Hyde, who handled the letting for Towler Shaw Roberts, said: "The property occupies a highly sought-after location off Harlescott Lane in the heart of the principal commercial area of Shrewsbury."

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Launching Restaurant Week 2026 are Seb Slater, Anika Saxton, Sam Castle, and Saskia Guy

Another week of culinary delights for county town

Shrewsbury's food and drink scene will take centre stage this autumn as Shrewsbury Restaurant Week returns from October 24 to November 1.

More than 30 local venues are expected to take part, offering fixed-price voucher deals alongside special events, collaborations and limited-edition menus.

The event is once again curated by Steve and Saskia Guy. Steve is a slow food entrepreneur and influencer and a director on the board of Hospitality Together, and Saskia is a creative marketing and events consultant in the hospitality sector.

Steve said: "Hospitality needs a huge amount of support at the moment. This is an opportunity to really showcase and promote what Shrewsbury has to offer."

Clock business makes time for cancer support charity



Katie Ashton is pictured with Lingen Davies communications and marketing co-ordinator Freya Morris

Newgate World – an Oswestry-based family business known worldwide for its iconic wall clocks – has donated 380 surplus clocks to benefit the £5 million Sunflower appeal run by Lingen Davies Cancer Support.

The charity is selling the clocks for £10 each, with all proceeds going to the appeal.

Katie Ashton, commercial director at Newgate World, said: "We know people whose lives have been touched by the charity's work, so it's especially meaningful to be able to contribute in this way."



A thriving business community developed and managed by Morris, already home to businesses making their mark



"Stadium Point is an excellent opportunity for investors to secure high-quality, energy-efficient units in a strategic location. The Park continues to perform exceptionally well in the local commercial market."

Toby Shaw, Commercial Agent, Towler Shaw Roberts



"Our units are really visible when you drive into the development and as a brand-new build it is a blank canvas for us – and only a mile from where we are already."

Chris Carr, Owner, Sailhouse Cars

"The quality of the build, the location, and the long-term potential of the site made this an easy decision. We're proud to become part of the Shropshire business community."

David Brown, Managing Director, Börger UK



"Purchasing the unit at Stadium Point gives us the stability and flexibility we need for future growth plus the location, dedicated parking and accessibility for staff make it an ideal fit for our business."

Oliver Rumford-Warr, (centre) owner and Managing Director of Fuelcare

11

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Pioneer in his field

An intellectual property patent specialist from a Shropshire firm has been named in an annual report recognising the 'pioneers' of the industry.

Ian Lambert is patent attorney and director at Wynne-Jones, which has a base at the e-innovation Centre in Telford, and has been cited in the IAM Strategy 300 list for his 'scientific curiosity and strategic thinking'.

He has more than 30 years of experience, acting for a wide range of clients including multinationals, SMEs and universities, and has represented clients at hearings before the European Patent Office.

He handles a broad range of technology including chemistry, chemical physics, sensors, mass-spectrometry, instrumentation, textiles, laser-based inventions, life sciences, medical devices and medical physics, materials, nanotechnology, plasma etching and semiconductors.

The IAM Strategy 300 report says: "His ability to spot commercial opportunities within complex technologies makes him a valued partner in building high-impact patent portfolios."



Patent attorney Ian Lambert

Importance of opportunities

Wenlock Spring, the independent family-run water bottler based near Church Stretton, is helping young people to take their first career steps by offering practical workplace opportunities.

Young people are contributing across its engineering, logistics, marketing, finance and data analysis teams through a mixture of apprenticeships, internships, site visits and work experience.

Director Matthew Orme said: "Local businesses have an important role to play in helping young people take their first steps into work. These opportunities can build confidence, develop practical skills and show how someone's interests or studies could translate into a future career."

"Manufacturing offers far more variety than many people realise, and by opening our doors we can give young people a clearer view of the different routes available across production, engineering, logistics, marketing, finance and data analysis."

Among those developing their careers at Wenlock Spring is Charlie Ralphs, who is completing a multi-channel marketing apprenticeship. He supports content creation, social media, campaigns, events and promotional activity.

Rhys Page, a Shrewsbury College T Level mechanical engineering student, first joined on a work experience placement. After impressing the team, he moved into a paid part-time summer role and has already helped produce a component for one of Wenlock Spring's crown capping machines.

The company has also welcomed Kaitlyn Orme through the University of Bristol's SME Internship Scheme, and opened its doors to design and technology students from Shrewsbury School for a tour of the site.

Building relationships on shared values

EFG International has signed an agreement for Canaccord Wealth to acquire its Harris Allday business, which provides wealth management services from offices in Shrewsbury, Birmingham and London.

It has around £3.1 billion of assets under its management, generating an annual revenue of £20.3 million last year.

EFG International says the sale should have a positive impact of more than £18 million on its pre-tax profits in the second half of 2026. The transaction is expected to close in the fourth quarter of this year.

Edward James, Harris Allday's managing director, said: "The Harris Allday business has undergone significant transformation under EFG's ownership and, as a market-leading wealth manager, Canaccord Wealth is the right fit, with the scale and capabilities, to support

the business, our colleagues and clients going forward.

"Canaccord Wealth shares Harris Allday's values, including its belief in creating and maintaining close, enduring relationships with clients."

Harris Allday was founded in the West Midlands with a history spanning over 175 years, and was acquired by EFG in 2006.

The business provides tailored investment solutions to individuals, families, trusts and charities with a local focus and has built an outstanding and loyal client base.

It says Canaccord Wealth is well-positioned to continue providing clients with a comprehensive service and wealth management expertise.

Deloitte is acting as exclusive financial advisor on the deal.



Edward James of Harris Allday

Bringing financial planning in-house

Shropshire-based WR Partners has launched a new service giving clients direct access to chartered financial planning advice alongside the accountancy and business support they already receive from the firm.

Until now, clients wanting financial planning advice on things like pensions, investments or protecting their business, would typically be referred out to a separate firm.

But the creation of WR Wealth changes that by bringing financial planning directly into the company's existing client relationships, so decisions about a client's business, personal finances and long-term future can be discussed as part of one joined-up conversation, rather than several disconnected ones.

The service is built on a formalised partnership with Benchmark – a chartered financial planning firm which WR Partners has referred clients to informally for some time.

That relationship is now built directly into the firm's offering, giving clients access to advice on personal finances, business protection, long-term growth and estate planning, alongside their accountancy work.

Managing partner at WR Partners Helen Spencer said: "WR Wealth feels like a natural next step for us. Our clients trust us with their accounts, their businesses and many of the decisions that shape their future.

"We want to support them with the bigger financial picture too. Protecting the futures of the people and businesses we work with has



Helen Spencer of WR Partners and Chris Copley of Benchmark at the launch of WR Wealth

always been at the heart of what we do, and WR Wealth lets us do that in a more complete way."

Chris Copley, regional director for the Midlands and North West at Benchmark, said: "For clients, it means their financial adviser already understands the full picture – the business, the accounts, the wider goals – without them having to explain it all over again. That makes for advice that's faster to give and better informed from the start."

Thousands of pounds towards vital causes

Hundreds of people across Shropshire are again set to benefit from McPhillips' community fund – with £18,000 being shared across five vital causes supporting men's mental health.

The award-winning construction and civil engineering firm – based in Telford – became the first business in the county to launch a dedicated grant scheme with the Shropshire Community Foundation last year.

In the inaugural year, £18,000 was handed to six community groups working with people suffering mental health issues or social isolation.

Now another five organisations focussing specifically on men's mental health and veteran support are set to receive grants. They are:

- 4 All Foundation – a men's outreach hub that holds weekly cafe sessions in Harlescote, Shrewsbury
- Ex-Forces to Community's – the Off the Back Foot project supporting veterans and their families in Telford & Wrekin to integrate into civilian life
- Feed the Birds – their Shropshire Men's Garden Bird project is a befriending service, offering weekly one to one volunteer home visits for isolated men
- Shrewsbury Men's Shed – it holds monthly cooking classes for shed members called Healthy Eating Cookery Skills
- Shropshire Rural Support – a project called Farmers' Pit Stop: Tackling Isolation in Rural Men, for isolated rural men across the region

McPhillips' managing director Paul Inions said: "We chose the theme of men's mental health after more than half the workforce voted to select mental health and wellbeing as their preferred cause.

"It is also great to assist an organisation helping veterans, something that reflects the company's longstanding commitment as a signatory of the Armed Forces Covenant."

A new patron for chamber of commerce is announced



Chamber chief executive Ruth Ross with Mike Shuker and Robert Parry of Shuker Building and Development

An award-winning construction company which has been celebrated as one of the county's fastest growing businesses has become the latest patron of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce.

Shuker Building and Development, based in Shrewsbury, delivers construction, refurbishment, and property solutions for homes, businesses, and community organisations.

Commercial director Robert Parry said: "Becoming a patron is a natural step for us. We've always believed that success isn't just about growing a business – it's about playing an active role in supporting the wider business community and contributing to the long-term success of our county.

"We see it as an opportunity to work alongside businesses that share the same ambition to make Shropshire an even better place to live, work and invest."



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Can we really trust search optimisation advice via AI?

Lauren Wood-Bennett



Every business owner I speak to right now has been pitched something involving the words "AI search optimisation". Chunk your content. Add a special file for ChatGPT. Rewrite everything for the algorithms.

It all sounds urgent, technical and expensive. Until recently, there wasn't much way for business owners to check whether any of it was actually true.

In May, Google finally published its own official guidance on how AI Overviews and its newer AI Mode actually work. I read it properly rather than relying on someone else's summary, and the honest version is far less dramatic than most of what's been sold to small businesses over the past year.

The guidance boils down to three things, and none of them are new. AI search and traditional search still reward websites that are fast, well-structured and easy to crawl. They still favour content built on genuine first-hand expertise rather than information anyone could copy. Local trust signals matter too, with an accurate, well-reviewed Google Business Profile remaining just as important for AI visibility as it has been for traditional search.

What's worth being sceptical of is any pitch built around urgency and unfamiliar terminology: chunking, special schema, AI-only file formats

This matters because a lot of what's circulating as expert advice in this space hasn't actually been checked against anything Google has said. It gets repeated from one source to another, gaining confidence each time, without anyone going back to the original guidance to see if it still holds up. That's worth remembering the next time someone pitches you something with confident, technical-sounding language attached.

The most useful part of Google's guidance is a section that directly names several tactics

currently being sold as essential AI SEO, and says businesses don't need any of them. That includes special text files written for AI crawlers, breaking content into small "chunks" and rewriting existing content with AI-specific phrasing bolted in. Separate research analysing more than 130,000 websites found that one of these, a file called llms.txt, delivers no measurable traffic to almost any site that's added one, despite being one of the most commonly recommended 'AI SEO' tactics over the past year.

For most small businesses, the practical takeaway is genuinely reassuring. If you've already invested in a fast, well-built website, real customer reviews, and content that reflects what you actually know, that work isn't wasted or out of date. It already counts for AI search too. You don't need a separate strategy bolted on top.

What's worth being sceptical of is any pitch built around urgency and unfamiliar terminology: chunking, special schema, AI-only file formats. Before spending money on any of it, it's worth asking a simple question: is this something Google has actually confirmed matters, or is it something that sounds technical enough to sound convincing? For example, a local accountant sharing practical tax advice, a solicitor answering common legal questions or a garden centre publishing seasonal planting guides is likely to be better positioned than a business that's simply paid to add the latest "AI SEO" features to its website.

The businesses doing well in AI search right now are, almost without exception, the same ones that were already doing the fundamentals properly. That's not a very exciting headline. It also happens to be true.

Lauren Wood-Bennett is the founder of Sow the Seed Marketing, an independent SEO, PPC, and marketing strategy consultancy based near Newport



One of the two buildings set to be renovated

Transforming a derelict site

Two Shropshire property companies have joined forces to transform a derelict site near Shrewsbury into new homes.

Legacy Group and Shuker Group have begun what they describe as a 'serious transformation' of the site in Hadnall, which will be turned into two homes.

Stuart Woodings of Legacy Group said: "We've been wanting to work alongside Shuker Group for some time. We've had plenty of conversations about finding the right project to bring our two companies together, and we've finally managed to get the first one over the line."

"It certainly won't be the last – we've already got other projects lined up together, so I'm really looking forward to seeing what we can achieve as the relationship grows."



Legacy Group and Shuker Group have joined forces on the project

Awards success for a fledgling consultancy

A business consultancy based in Much Wenlock has won two national awards, just months after its launch.

Cowell and Co has been named Business Consultancy of the Year at The Business Awards UK, and Operating System Integrator of the Year at the UK Enterprise Awards.

Boss Sylvie Cowell revealed she has had to explain the meaning of that second category to most of the people who congratulated her.

"Almost nobody has heard of it. Founders have plenty of choices when it comes to coaches, consultants and advisors. What is harder to find is someone who will step into the business, take genuine accountability for the operational result, and stay until the change is embedded. That is the job."

Sylvie works as a 'fractional integrator', becoming the part-time operational second-in-command to a business owner, sitting inside the leadership team rather than advising it from outside.

Her clients are typically founder-led businesses of between eight and thirty people, in mortgage broking, technology, professional advisory and agency work.

"The businesses I meet across the county are not short of ambition and they are not short of good people," she says. "What they are short of is structure. Priorities get agreed and then quietly abandoned. Meetings become updates rather than decisions. And gradually everything routes back through the founder, who ends up as the bottleneck in their own business."

Her work draws on EOS – the Entrepreneurial Operating System – a framework used by more than 170,000 companies worldwide and with a community that is growing in Shropshire.



Sylvie Cowell of Cowell and Co

Could your business benefit from engaging an experienced mentor?

Over my 45-year business career I benefitted hugely from the objective and strategic advice I received from non-executives and business mentors, all of whom had 'been there and done it'.

They ensured we stayed on track through advising, probing, questioning and making us accountable at board meetings every month.

Over that time, I've built and sold six businesses, been through 4 acquisitions and, for the past 10 years, I've worked in M&A, advising entrepreneurs on the sale of their businesses.

My experience covers all aspects of establishing, managing, growing and selling small businesses, including:

- Strategic planning
- Intellectual Property
- Sales & marketing
- Contracts
- M&A, finance & funding
- Building management teams

I took my branded goods business from zero to £3m in 3 years

It's this experience I could bring to bear for business owners who are ambitious, looking to grow or perhaps planning an exit.

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John Knight,
Managing Director,
Strategic Business Exits Ltd



Engineering centre will be world class

Telford College is to develop a £5.6 million “world class” engineering centre to train students in advanced technologies.

The new Industrial Technology Training Centre, funded by a £4.7m Government grant and £925,000 college investment, will be developed at the Wellington campus.

The investment will see a complete refurbishment of W Block – a four-storey building, creating modern engineering laboratories, CAD and digital design suites.

The building will be equipped to support courses including additive manufacturing, robotics, automation, cyber systems and drone tech.

Backed by Telford’s advanced manufacturing and engineering employers, the new training centre will create 205 additional study places for 16-to-19-year-olds.

Principal and chief executive Lawrence Wood said: “The funding means we can enhance and grow our advanced engineering curriculum to meet the needs of employers.

“Businesses here want to recruit high-skilled employees and through the development of our new industrial technology training centre, we are playing our part in this.”

The funding is part of a £287 million national programme to expand post-16 education and construction skills capacity.



A new industrial technology training centre will be opening in Wellington

Five core skills would strengthen economy

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has published a new report setting out five core skills development priorities to strengthen the local economy over the next three years.

The Marches Local Skills Improvement Plan report lists manufacturing, health & social care, construction, digital transformation and professional skills as key areas for attention on the local education and training agenda.

It follows months of analysis and interviews with local businesses who have cited persistent workforce shortages, employer demand for workforce ready capabilities, and the need to strengthen the region’s economic resilience.

Shropshire Chamber was appointed in 2022 as the employer representative body for the Marches, which covers Herefordshire, Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

The latest report, which is one of 39 LSIPs across England, marks the start of a second three-year cycle, and is designed to place employers and educators at the heart of the local skills agenda.

It says: “The Marches has a resilient labour market with high employment and low economic inactivity as a whole, but with geographical pockets and distinct cohorts where unemployment or inactivity is higher than desired.

“As a predominantly rural area, it faces challenges around access to education, training,

and employment. Rising numbers of 16 to 17-year-olds not in education, employment, or training highlight the need for stronger local pathways.”

The report points to the launch of several initiatives which are working to address the situation, including new youth hubs and bootcamp-style ‘Step Into’ courses.

“Skills progression is a concern, with relatively low attainment at degree level, particularly in Telford & Wrekin. Limited higher education provision contributes to out-migration of young people, creating a risk of long-term skills loss.

The report points to the launch of several initiatives which are working to address the situation

“Continuing to strengthen the higher education offer from our local further education providers and specialist higher education institutions is therefore essential – and we are starting to see the offer grow.”

Collaborations between local FE colleges and out-of-area universities are praised in the report as a ‘forward step in offering a greater range of courses for local students’.

The report adds: “Encouragingly, apprenticeship achievement rates are comparatively strong, demonstrating the value of alternative pathways.”

The Marches LSIP plays a key role in aligning education and training with employer needs, improving access to local opportunities, and reducing skills gaps.

The Marches team collaborates with employers, post-16 education providers, local authorities and a wide range of public and private sector partners to strengthen the link between training and employment.

“Strong collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential to building a future-ready workforce in the Marches,” said Rosie Beswick, project manager for Marches LSIP.

“This means supporting young people who choose to stay locally, showing those who leave for university the opportunities to return, and helping the existing workforce develop the skills modern industry needs.

“Employer input has been vital to the progress made so far, and their voice remains critical. By sharing sector insights, supporting curriculum development or simply taking part in an LSIP interview, businesses help training providers understand industry needs and shape courses that reflect modern workplace standards.

“As needs evolve, ongoing employer feedback will help partners respond and keep skills provision relevant.”



Ray Hickinbottom of the FSB in conversation



Keynote speaker Mo Chaudry

Access to Finance: Why the funding landscape has changed

There was a time when business finance felt like a wide open tap. Grants were plentiful, interest rates were stable, and lenders were competing hard for market share.

Entrepreneurs could access support simply by showing ambition, a credible plan, and a willingness to grow. It wasn’t quite “free money”, but it wasn’t far off.

These days, the funding landscape is far more complex – which is why forward-looking businesses were invited to a fact-finding event in Shrewsbury to help them understand the current landscape.

Around 100 investors, lenders and businesses attended The Summer Funding Summit at Shrewsbury Town’s Croud Meadow, organised by Shropshire Growth Hub and Invest Telford, in partnership with the British Business Bank and Shropshire Chamber of Commerce.

The summit included expert-led sessions on funding routes and investment, presentations from lenders, and a fireside chat with Wellington-raised entrepreneur Mo Chaudry on his business journey.

Mo, who sold Waterworld in Staffordshire in a multi-million pound deal earlier this year, spoke about how recognising and following business instinct, and the willingness to take risks, were still the most important factors in success.

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce showcased its Finance Finder – a digital tool designed to match businesses with relevant financial opportunities, including loans, equity, grants, and commercial funding.

Shropshire Growth Hub manager Ruth Westwood said: “Events like this one are vitally important because funding can really unlock progress for businesses.

“However, it can also be a challenging area for many, and the summit was designed to change the perception of that; it was about demystifying funding and hearing from those behind the programmes.

“It was great to have so many businesses with us learning about how they can unlock



Speakers and organisers at the Summer Funding Summit



Around 100 investors, lenders and businesses attended

funding for the first time, plan the next stage of their growth and see what is available to them.”

Mo, who became a millionaire by the age of 30, has launched a new MOMentum Capital venture, funded by his own cash, to help entrepreneurs launch or grow their businesses.

He said: “When you start up a business it can be lonely and no one wants to come and comfort you.

“What you need is support, mentoring and to know where you can access finance, and that is what events like this are crucial for – to help businesses navigate their way around what could be quite a difficult issue to face.”

Alongside the event, there is a wider campaign to promote the availability of business funding through the Marches Growth Hub Business Support Finder – an online resource

with a searchable database of local and national funding programmes.

Delegates were assured that funding was still out there – in many cases from a more diverse range of providers than ever – but heard that accessing it required sharper preparation, clearer strategy, and a better understanding of the options available.

The shift from easy money to strategic finance, the rise of alternative funding models, the growth of algorithm driven lending, and the evolving balance between debt and equity shaped many of the conversations, presentations and debates.

Businesses were told that they were now in an era of strategic finance... where Shropshire employers must be more informed, more prepared, and more proactive.

Cyber security doesn't have to be complicated or expensive

Simple steps Shropshire businesses can take to stay secure – and win business with confidence



Cyber attacks – faceless and nameless attempts are made to access your data at an alarming rate



Madhu Veerappan

Cyber security can sometimes feel like something only large organisations need to worry about.

But if your business uses email, Microsoft 365, online banking, cloud applications, laptops or mobile phones, you have something worth protecting. The good news is that improving your cyber security does not necessarily mean buying expensive security products. For most businesses, it starts with getting a few simple things right.

Start with your online accounts

Email, banking, accounting systems, customer platforms, social media and cloud storage all depend on online accounts. If somebody gets access to the wrong account, they may be able to impersonate you, access sensitive information or target your customers and suppliers.

Use strong, unique passwords and a password manager to make them easier to manage. Enable two-step verification or multi-factor authentication wherever possible, use passkeys where appropriate, and remove accounts that are no longer needed.

Secure the devices that run your business

Keep laptops and desktops up to date, enable firewalls and malware protection, control who can access devices and information, and avoid giving everyone administrator privileges. Ideally, administrator access should be separate from the account used for everyday work. Good cyber security is often about doing the basics consistently and properly.

Use Cyber Essentials to prove the basics are in place

Cyber Essentials is the UK Government-backed scheme designed to help organisations protect themselves against common cyber attacks. It focuses on five key areas: secure configuration, user access control, security updates, firewalls and malware protection. Cyber Essentials is independently verified, while Cyber Essentials Plus goes further with a hands-on technical assessment of a sample of your systems.

Customers, supply chains and tender documents are increasingly asking about cyber security. Some contracts require Cyber Essentials or Cyber Essentials Plus before a business can participate. That means good security is not only about reducing risk – it can also become a business enabler.

We help businesses stay secure and win more business with confidence

We teach. We guide. We simplify. We protect. CNI Security Solutions is an NCSC Assured Cyber Advisor and an IASME Certification Body. We have helped more than 100 organisations achieve or renew Cyber Essentials certification and have extensive experience delivering Cyber Essentials Plus assessments for organisations of all sizes.

As an NCSC Assured Cyber Advisor, our role is not simply to sell products or certifications. We help businesses understand their risks, identify the controls that are appropriate for them, and make cyber security practical and achievable.

For businesses that need ongoing support rather than another full-time employee, CNI can continue to help manage and improve security throughout the year – your security team, without the cost of building one.

Start by securing your accounts. Secure your devices. Get the fundamentals right. Then use recognised standards such as Cyber Essentials to demonstrate to your customers that security matters to your business.

● *Eligible businesses in Telford & Wrekin can access up to 12 hours of funded cyber security support. Contact: info@cnisecurity.co.uk*



Madhu Nachiappan Veerappan is the founder, director, and lead consultant of CNI Security Solutions

Training CIC has a new home

A Shropshire company which provides vocational training across a range of sectors and supports young learners is to move into a new suite at Shrewsbury Business Park as the next stage of its expansion.

RENU Training CIC has completed the letting of a modern first floor office suite at Sycamore House's West Wing, marketed by Towler Shaw Roberts, with the property to accommodate the company's alternative provision programme for pre-16 learners from this September.

It follows the recent relocation of RENU Training Academy, another arm of the company, from Dorrington to the East Wing at Sycamore House, with the two-storey property at Sitka Drive its new headquarters.

Gail Smallman, co-director alongside Charlotte Walder of RENU Training CIC, said: "It allows us to work with a new sector of pre-16 learners from September onwards.

"It's the next natural step to move into pre-16, so we can support young people from a younger age for a longer period of time."



Owners Luke Henley and Shey Recalde at Henley Padel in Shrewsbury

Padel centre and pilates available under one roof

A new indoor padel centre in Shrewsbury has welcomed its first players.

Henley Padel has opened at the town's Battlefield Enterprise Park, run by Shropshire couple Luke Henley and Shey Recalde.

The centre – a totally transformed commercial unit in Knights Way – features two panoramic courts, as well as changing rooms, a range of racquets, balls and accessories to buy or hire,

and a social area for players to enjoy a coffee and snacks.

Henley Padel is also home to Casa Pilates.

Luke said: "We are extremely proud and very happy with what we have achieved. It's been fantastic to have such an amazing response from the community and from the people of Shrewsbury and the surrounding areas since the soft launch.

"We have also already had a lot of enquiries for corporate events, birthday parties and reunions of friends from their school days."

Are you a commercial landlord with leases due to expire in the next couple of years?

If so, it may be in your interest to negotiate an early renewal with your tenant, to avoid the upcoming ban on upwards-only rent review clauses in business leases. Upwards-only rent review clauses have traditionally been a common feature in commercial leases. These clauses ensure that the rent payable after a review cannot fall below the current rent, even if market conditions would dictate a lower rent. While this provides landlords with financial security and protects the value of their assets, it can result in tenants paying above-market rents in a declining rental market.

Due to recent legislation this is about to change. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, which gained Royal Assent on 29 April 2026, provides that any variable rent review mechanism preventing rent from falling below a minimum level will be unenforceable.

Although the Act has been passed, the ban on upwards-only rent reviews has not yet commenced. This will be set by regulations and is expected to come into force sometime in 2027 or 2028. In the meantime, existing leases containing upwards-only rent review clauses will remain valid until their expiry. The ban will apply to new and renewal business tenancies (including mixed use tenancies) with variable rent reviews (e.g. linked to the open market/index-linked/turnover reviews) which are entered into after the ban takes effect. Stepped rents or fixed rents are unaffected.

Will it apply retrospectively?

Renewal leases are caught where the renewal is pursuant to an option contained in an agreement/lease dated on or after 17 March 2026.

To discuss your position and how you might benefit from early renegotiation please get in touch with a member of our Commercial Property Team. Call us on 01743 248545, or send an email to mail@hatchers.co.uk.

HATCHERS Solicitors LLP



Helen Cowley
Legal Director and
Head of Commercial
Property



Emma Rigby
Associate Solicitor



Beth Tonks
Legal Executive and
Licenced Conveyancer

Feather in the cap for hotel portfolio



Kaye Wilson from Crest Hotels, Phillip Allsopp and Louise Allsopp of Classic British Hotels, and Jason Hiley and Greg Loweth of Crest Hotels

Classic British Hotels has announced an expansion of its 'curated collection' following a new partnership with Crest Hotels Group, which includes the Feathers Hotel in Ludlow.

The deal brings 674 bedrooms into the Classic British Hotels fold – including 42 in Ludlow – giving the owners access to agency and corporate commercial partnerships.

Jason Hiley, managing director at Crest Hotels Group, said: "Aligning our entire collection including our iconic Feathers Hotel with Classic British Hotels is the perfect next step for our group."

"It allows us to retain the completely independent identity and unique charm of each property while benefiting from the robust marketing, distribution, and sales reach of a highly-respected national brand. We look forward to a brilliant collaboration."

Reaching milestones

An award-winning firm of architects has taken on new staff and hit a raft of major performance milestones during a successful 12 months.

Base Architects – which has offices in Shrewsbury, Chester and Conwy – says it has built a strong portfolio of residential and commercial projects, a reputation for outstanding customer service and a track record of successful delivery.

The firm, which works across both residential and commercial projects and has been established for 23 years, has also developed a national profile for designing homes which are granted permission in open countryside because of the high standard of their design.

Directors Bryn Jones and Ben Embrey said the past 12 months had laid the foundations for further growth in the coming years.

Bryn said: "Over the past year we've seen sustained demand across commercial, residential and specialist sectors."

In the past year the firm has been instructed on 237 new projects, received approval for 36 out of 40 planning applications submitted – a 90 per cent success rate – and managed 24 projects on site through construction.

Ben said: "These results show the breadth of what we do – from early-stage feasibility through to managing construction on site."

"Our planning approval rate remains exceptionally strong, and we're proud of the trust clients place in us to deliver wonderful homes and workplaces."

Two new members of staff have joined the team – architectural technologist Alex Hudson and



Carl Huntley, Ben Embrey, and Bryn Jones

architectural assistant Josh Greenwood – with Bailey Gledhill also due to join next month on a T-Level industrial placement.

Jack Harris, who first joined Base in 2017, has been promoted to associate director, while Dan Gibbons and Harry Braid passed their Part 3 qualifications to become fully-qualified architects and have been promoted to associates.

Base continues to build its reputation in specialist areas including Paragraph 84 projects, which are being led by company founder Carl Huntley, who remains as chairman within the business.

Ben added: "We are one of two nationally-recognised firms when it comes to Paragraph 84 projects – sometimes called Grand Designs homes – which allow for the construction of new homes in open countryside because of their exceptional design quality."

"It's something which not only showcases the quality of our work but also the fact that we are happy to work across the country delivering high-end designs with a high-end service."

How much do you actually know about your debtors?

A debt recovery expert is urging Shropshire businesses to ensure they have comprehensive details of their debtors – to prevent potential financial problems.

Debbie Ray, of Shropshire law firm Lanyon Bowdler, says she is seeing an increase in people who have little or no essential information about a debtor, making debt recovery more difficult.

"Unfortunately, this is a growing trend – people not knowing their debtor or, in many cases, not even being aware of their full name."

"In the absence of written correspondence to establish liability, we have to rely on surrounding evidence to try to establish this instead."

"This can be tricky in cases where, for example, an employee dealing with the matter leaves the business, instructions are being received via a third party, or any relevant paperwork is not held or lost. This results in the almost inevitable situation of incurring higher costs."

"This can be avoided however by simple good housekeeping – getting to know your customer from the outset and using a credit application form or new customer form to record all the relevant details."

Debbie said something as simple as making sure businesses know the full legal name of their customers is vital when dealing with private individuals.

"It's a good idea to ask sole traders for their name and home address as well as their trading title, and for any customers trading as a partnership, try to get the names and addresses of all the partners of the business."

"You will probably need these details in order to pursue the sole trader or partners personally for debts incurred by the business."

"In the case of a limited company or limited liability partnership,



Debbie Ray of Lanyon Bowdler



Managing partner Brian Evans

obtain the company's registration number. Company names can be changed, which may lead to confusion but the company registration number remains the same.

"Finally, as with any legal issues you may be unsure of, we would always advise you to seek professional advice on the steps you should take to avoid any unnecessary difficulties popping up in the future."

Lanyon Bowdler has been ranked second in the Midlands, based on client satisfaction scores, in the latest Legal 500 research. It places the firm alongside some of the country's largest and most respected legal practices.

Managing partner Brian Evans said: "What makes this achievement especially pleasing is that it is based on feedback from our clients. Their trust and confidence is very important to us, and it is rewarding to know they value the service we provide."

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Helping hand to reduce energy bills

Thermal insulation specialist Seymour Manufacturing International (SMI) has announced a new strategic partnership aimed at helping organisations reduce energy consumption, cut operating costs and improve sustainability performance.

The collaboration with True Group will see both companies introduce each other's expertise to relevant customers and networks, creating new opportunities and what they describe as "measurable value" for organisations seeking commercially-driven energy efficiency solutions.

Through shared content, events and referrals, Telford-based SMI will help connect organisations with True Group's strategic energy and sustainability support.

In turn, Guildford-based True Group will promote SMI's proven thermal insulation technologies to businesses that could benefit from reducing unnecessary energy loss.

Jill Seymour, managing director of SMI, said: "This partnership is a natural fit. True Group shares our commitment to helping organisations make practical, commercially sensible improvements that deliver real results.

"By combining our Temprow technology with their strategic insight, we can help even more businesses unlock energy savings they didn't realise were possible. We're excited about the measurable value this collaboration will create for customers across multiple sectors."



SMI promoting its products at the Cold Chain Live exhibition in Telford



True Group CEO Chris Maclean

True Group says the partnership will help businesses uncover one of the most overlooked opportunities in energy management: preventing avoidable energy waste.

CEO Chris Maclean said: "We're on a

mission to save two million tonnes of carbon (CO2e) and £2 billion of energy costs for our customers by 2030.

"By combining True Group's strategic expertise with SMI's proven technology, the two organisations will support businesses in identifying projects that deliver meaningful reductions in energy consumption, operating costs and carbon emissions."

SMI, based at Stafford Park, has been a leader in thermal insulation innovation since the 1980s, working with many of the UK's most recognisable brands including Waitrose, Sainsbury's, ASDA, Morrisons, Marks & Spencer, Lidl and Co op, as well as the NHS and Ministry of Defence.

Connecting a community

Entrepreneurs, freelancers, and remote workers are being invited to connect at the next Co-Work Hub: Connect, Create, Collaborate session organised by the Shropshire Growth Hub.

The initiative provides a vibrant, welcoming space designed to help Shropshire's small business community work productively and thrive together. The next event is scheduled for September 17, with free tickets available through Eventbrite.

Anna Sadler, Shropshire Growth Hub officer, said: "Working for yourself or running a small business can be an incredibly isolating experience, and our main goal was to create a space that breaks down those walls.

"Seeing local freelancers, remote workers, and founders come together under one roof to support each other, share advice, and collaborate has been fantastic. It proves just how vital a connected local business community is for Shropshire."

Designed to combat the isolation often experienced by solopreneurs, the ongoing event series provides an open, pressure-free co-working environment where attendees can focus on their own projects while tapping into a supportive local business community.

Rather than a rigid, formal networking event, the hub provides a relaxed space to organically exchange ideas, share operational challenges, and explore potential partnerships.

In addition to peer-to-peer collaboration, attendees benefit from the presence of an 'expert in residence' to offer light-touch, practical guidance on crucial business development topics, including marketing strategy, social media, grant funding, and business planning.

For those requiring deeper, tailored strategic guidance, the event offers attendees the opportunity to book exclusive 1:2:1 sessions with dedicated business advisors.

The initiative has earned strong praise from previous attendees



A Shropshire Growth Hub co-working session

including Antony Taylor, XR Business founder, board advisor, and Fractional Technology strategy provider.

Alex Hall, representing Nutrition AI, said: "The sessions offer fresh perspectives from experienced peers with the hub acting as an open, engaging space to build regional connections that would otherwise be difficult to reach."

It's a special acquisition

Law firm FBC Manby Bowdler has acquired The Specialist Law Group for an undisclosed sum, marking its second major investment in 2026.

FBC Manby Bowdler is the founding firm of the Adeptio Law Group, which was launched following a £30 million private equity investment by Horizon Capital to create a leading national legal services platform through strategic acquisitions.

The latest deal will see Worcester-based SLG's brands, which include The Employment Solicitor and The Company Solicitor, continue to trade under their existing names.

FBC Manby Bowdler has offices in Telford, Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth and Church Stretton

Neil Lloyd, chief executive of Adeptio Law Group and FBC Manby Bowdler, said: "This investment significantly strengthens our employment law offering at exactly the right time.

"We're adding strength and depth to our teams across Birmingham, the West Midlands and Shropshire just as the Employment Rights Act is creating real demand from businesses across the region and beyond.

"It also gives us a base in Worcester from which we plan to build a much broader range of services."

SLG managing director Helen Moore, who will remain at the helm of the firm, said the investment was an exciting next step for the business and her 'passionate' team.

She said she was not originally looking to sell her business, but was attracted by the friendliness and professionalism of the FBC Manby Bowdler team and the level of support on offer.

"Being part of a larger group gives us access to greater resources and investment in technology, which means we can reach more clients and deliver even better services."

The acquisition is the latest step in Adeptio Law Group's growth strategy. In March, Black Country practice Jordans Solicitors was acquired, adding offices in Blackheath and Halesowen to the group.

Flavour of summer



Love Ice Cream at Salop Leisure in Emstrey, Shrewsbury

Salop Leisure has launched Love Ice Cream – a new ice cream destination at its Emstrey headquarters in Shrewsbury.

Next to the Love Coffee café, it serves a selection of ice creams that can be enjoyed in a newly-created outdoor seating area.

Head of marketing Ed Glover said: "We wanted to create somewhere that people could enjoy spending time together during the summer.

"It's a place where people can stop, relax and make the most of the facilities we have here."

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Guests from Bridgnorth Aluminium and the local community celebrate the official opening of the Community Garden

Celebrating 25 years and a UK production commitment

One of Shropshire’s largest employers has completed its latest capital equipment installation to take total investment in its factory to £180 million.

Bridgnorth Aluminium – the UK’s last remaining aluminium rolling mill – revealed the new thin gauge slitting line at a special party to mark 25 years of ownership by Viohalco Group, a Greek industrial powerhouse.

More than 500 members of staff, local dignitaries and key stakeholders enjoyed live music, games and a guided tour of a site that is now viewed as being critical to the UK’s sovereign manufacturing push.

Originally formed as Star Aluminium 90 years ago, the company has bounced back from a difficult trading period to return to 24/7 production, creating 35 new jobs in the first six months of this year.

“We are firmly committed to production in the UK and respect the special role Bridgnorth Aluminium plays in local life, providing employment for several generations of family,” said Giorgos Drakos, board member of Bridgnorth Aluminium.

“With this in mind, we wanted to mark 25 years of ownership by celebrating our tremendous workforce and the recent challenges we have overcome with Covid, tariffs and rising energy prices.”

He said the event was an opportunity to say thank you to ‘the heartbeat of the business’ and to start writing a new chapter in the next 25 years of its history.

As part of its celebrations, Bridgnorth Aluminium has reinforced its commitment to the local area by donating £25,000 to charities and community groups, including a dedicated £15,000 boost to the Shropshire Community Foundation to reduce loneliness in rural areas.



From left are Michael Stassinopoulos (chairman of Viohalco), Lord Gavin Hamilton (owner of Apley Estate), Gerhard Trilling (board member of BAL), Anna Turner (Lord Lieutenant of Shropshire) and Ilias Avgerinos (general manager of BAL)



Guests took an exclusive car tour around Bridgnorth Aluminium’s factory



Brett Kelly, Craig Cartwright and Alec Middleton



Product engineer Duncan Poole with board member Giorgos Drakos



Claire Mooney and Richard Renton-Cooper



Back row from left, Valerie McGinty, Gemma Humphreys, Rebecca Pibworth, Melissa Utting, Lesley Haynes, Sarah Cadwallader and Alec Middleton. Front row from left, Jim Griffiths, Jack O’Connell and Georgina Fogg



From left are Adrian Musgrave (head of Sales at BAL), Michael Stassinopoulos (chairman of Viohalco), Konstantinos Katsaros (chairman of BAL), Ilias Avgerinos (general manager of BAL), Giorgos Drakos (board member of BAL), Gerhard Trilling (board member of BAL)



George Markopoulos, Sean Whelan, Adam Blakemore and Elliott Lynch



The FRO.blinds team with the Mayor of Shrewsbury, Cllr Bernie Bentick

New showroom is celebrated

An established family firm which began with a curtain stall in a Shropshire market has opened a new showroom in Shrewsbury, creating three new jobs.

FRO.blinds on St Mary's Street was officially opened by the Mayor of Shrewsbury, Councillor Bernie Bentick, in front of members of the local business community.

It is the second showroom for Andy Simpson and his sister Ness Ebanks, who also have a successful base in Market Street, Wellington.

Andy said: "It is a very exciting time for our business and we are delighted to be able to open a showroom in the heart of another wonderful town. Our base at Wellington has been going from strength to strength and this expansion and growth is a natural step for our business."



Michael McDermott from Home Creations, Beryl Simpson and Darren Roberts



Rebecca Gill, Jasmine Davies, and Donna Macnab



Andy Simpson from FRO.blinds with Caitlin Marsh from Interiors at St Mary's



Jamie Comley from supplier Decora with Andy Simpson from FRO.blinds



Jenny Hotchkiss from Snoop, Andy Simpson, and Kirsty Smallman from J&PR



Ness Ebanks, Ben Hall and Isabelle Maclachlan



Sid Heath, Beth Heath, Carl Jones and Ruth Ross



Chamber members at the summer barbecue

Networking at barbecue

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce gave members the chance to network in relaxed surroundings at its summer barbecue.

The event was held at the Albright Hussey Hotel near Shrewsbury, including food served from the hotel's al-fresco kitchen. It was a chance for local business people to build new connections or catch up with familiar faces in a welcoming, informal setting.



Kirsty Smallman and Nigel West

Legal minds meet at vineyard

Hencote Vineyard near Shrewsbury played host to legal professionals from across the region when X-Press Legal Services launched its new Leadership in Law CPD event.

More than 30 law firm leaders attended the full day event which included presentations, lunch, and a private vineyard tour.

Presentations included the operational essentials of leading a conveyancing department, a personal injury spotlight, and how to unlock the untapped potential within legal teams.



The Leadership in Law CPD event held at Hencote Vineyard

Special evening with boxing star organised by MP

Boxing fans, residents and local businesses came together for a special evening with Telford boxing star Liam Davies.

The event at The Brewery Inn, in Coalport, raised £500 for Lingen Davies Cancer Support as well as supporting Liam to train as part of his summer camp.

It was organised by Telford MP Shaun Davies, who is one of Liam's sponsors, in collaboration with the team at the pub.

The event gave supporters the opportunity to hear first-hand from Liam about his boxing journey, the defining moments of his career and the dedication required to compete at the highest level of the sport in a Q&A with BBC Shropshire's Paul Shuttleworth.



The event included a Q&A session with Liam Davies



Liam Davies, Shaun Davies and Paul Shuttleworth with the team from The Brewery Inn



All About Youth team members



Trustees Neil Bentley, David Bishop and Niamh Kelly



Richard Parkes, Shaun Knott, Manjit Sangha



Emma Brown, Charlotte Cain and Adrian Penny

Pledging to help county's young

Businesses and community supporters from across Shropshire pledged their support for young people after coming together to celebrate a major milestone for All About Youth.

Around 50 guests attended the charity's Breakfast with the Best event in Shrewsbury, where they were invited to make a personal pledge outlining how they could support and champion the organisation over the coming year.

The event celebrated All About Youth becoming the first and only youth organisation in the Midlands to achieve the prestigious National Youth Agency (NYA) Quality Mark, while also looking ahead to the next chapter of the charity's work.

Guests heard presentations from members of the All About Youth team showcasing the organisation's achievements over the past year and its vision for delivering the next generation of youth work across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.



The presentation at the breakfast event



Around 50 guests attended the charity's Breakfast with the Best event



Andy Hall, Leanne Macpherson, Joe Green and Leigh Willott



Richard Parkes, Kirsty Smallman and Nigel West



Volunteers and supporters of All About Youth with CEO Richard Parkes



Sam Ostermeyer and Wayne Flynn



Halls senior planning consultant Paul Watson (centre) with land and development manager Dan Callaghan (right) and planning consultant Ed Blunt



Steven Murgatroyd and Nia Davies at the Oswestry office



Rachel Davies is the new head of credit at BCRS Business Loans

Key role in sanctioning agreements

Business loans provider BCRS Business Loans has announced the appointment of Rachel Davies as head of credit.

With more than 30 years of experience in the finance sector, Rachel has built an extensive career with leading banks including NatWest and Barclays where she supported local businesses with their financing needs.

In her new role as head of credit, Rachel will play a key role in sanctioning deals and supporting the business development and wider team, enabling BCRS Business Loans to meet the needs of its customers and support the local economy.

Chief executive Stephen Deakin said: "Rachel's appointment comes at an important time for BCRS Business Loans as we continue to see strong demand from businesses across the West Midlands and Wales that are struggling to access finance through mainstream channels.

"Her experience, combined with a genuine understanding of what smaller businesses need to grow, make her a fantastic addition to the team. I'm confident Rachel will play a vital role in helping us make lending decisions that support local businesses and the wider regional economy."

Big changes at property firm

Kate Howells says she has landed her dream job after being promoted to area lettings manager at Halls, covering the company's Telford and Kidderminster offices.

Born and bred in Telford and with seven years of experience in the housing market, she joined the company in May as a sales and lettings negotiator and quickly impressed directors with her work ethic.

Her mission in her new role is to grow the lettings portfolio in both offices by building strong relationships with landlords.

"A friend recommended Halls as a good company to work for and it is so much more than that," she explained. "It was a scary decision, at the age of 42, to change jobs but I have never been so happy in a role and the directors and staff are so friendly and supportive."

Kate's promotion comes as growing demand for planning and development services across Shropshire and bordering counties has led Halls to take on two new staff.

The addition of Dan Callaghan, land development and new home manager and Ed Blunt, planning consultant, expands the team to 10 at the Shrewsbury-based office.

Dan has worked in Australia and the UK over the past 30 years as a development manager, property consultant and sustainable development specialist.

He has advised landowners, including Grosvenor Estates and Land Securities as a consultant on redevelopment and disposal strategies and as a property developer at St George, Multiplex UK and APN Property Group, including the Brent Cross Town urban regeneration project.

Ed, who has a degree in sociology and criminology and a masters in spatial planning and development, said he was delighted to have secured the post with Halls in his home town.

Paul Watson, Halls associate director and senior planning consultant, said his department had seen a 20 per cent increase in business in the past year, including many more complex planning applications.

Meanwhile, Halls has also strengthened its Oswestry residential team by welcoming back an experienced former colleague while promoting a rising star.

Steven Murgatroyd previously stepped away to care for his late wife, Lesley. He first joined the company in 2012 and has almost three decades of estate agency experience.

Nia Davies, 25, from Ellesmere, joined the in-house residential training programme in 2024 after a successful career with M&S. She has been promoted to senior sales negotiator and valuer.



Kate Howells says she has landed her dream role

Enjoying being part of the team

Grace Bywater is Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's new events and training manager.

She joined the Chamber team last summer and has been promoted to the role after completing her apprenticeship with SBC Training.

She said: "I've really enjoyed meeting our local business community at events, and I can't express how supportive everyone has been throughout my development journey.

"Now it's my turn to give back by delivering valuable events and training courses that continue to support local businesses."

Grace, from Shrewsbury, graduated from Cardiff University with a degree in English literature, journalism and media.

She said she joined the Chamber team because she wanted to build a career where she could work closely with people, help organise events, and get involved in marketing.

"I enjoy being part of a team, coming up with creative ideas, and making sure things run smoothly. I am especially interested in roles that let me connect with others and create memorable experiences."



Grace Bywater

Three directors newly appointed

A growing education trust has announced three major leadership appointments as it looks ahead to its next phase of development across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.

Four Hills Education Trust has appointed Joseph Piatczynyn as director of vision and strategy, Darren Lennon as director of school flourishing and Julie Marriott as director of school development. Four Hills Education Trust includes Millbrook Primary in Leegomery, Meadows Primary in Ketley, William Reynolds Primary in Woodside, Albrighton Primary and Woodlands Primary in Madeley.

Chief executive Kirsty Osman said: "As we continue to grow, it is vital that we invest in leadership capacity that will strengthen our schools, support our staff and ensure our CARE values of Critical Thinking, Aspiration, Resilience and Empathy remain central to every decision we make."

Joseph Piatczynyn will continue as headteacher of Meadows Primary School, while Darren is a practising Ofsted inspector with extensive expertise in SEND, behavioural support and alternative provision.

Julie is the former headteacher of William Reynolds Primary School, where she led the school to achieve and sustain outstanding Ofsted judgements.

Positive contributions from all

Law firm PCB Solicitors has appointed three new associates and one new senior associate, recognising the contribution of lawyers across its Shrewsbury, Knighton and Church Stretton offices.

Sandy Jackson, Nikki Doherty and Louise Coleby have been appointed associates, while Rachael Stokes has become a senior associate.

Rachael Stokes is a solicitor in the wills and probate team and is based in Shrewsbury. Sandy Jackson is a chartered legal executive in the firm's dispute resolution team, also based in Shrewsbury, and has been with PCB Solicitors since 1998.

Nikki Doherty is a solicitor in the wills and probate team, based in Knighton. who attends local events to develop business relationships in the area.

Louise Coleby is a licensed conveyancer in the residential property team, based in Church Stretton. She joined the company in October 2025.

Managing partner Ryan Bickham said: "These appointments are very well deserved and reflect not only the quality of their work, but also the positive contribution they make to the wider firm."

The company has offices in Shrewsbury, Telford, Church Stretton, Knighton and Ludlow, and appointment-only meeting locations in Bishop's Castle, Newtown and Welshpool.



Rachael Stokes, Nikki Doherty, Sandy Jackson and Louise Coleby

Helping customers to fulfil holiday dreams

Shrewsbury-based Sharon Parkes has taken on an Explorer Travel Holidays franchise, selling services on behalf of Hays Travel Limited.

She has access to more than 400 trusted holiday and travel suppliers, including exclusive deals not always available online. The franchise

benefits from Hays Travel's membership of ABTA.

Sharon said she wanted to provide a service designed to remove the overwhelm of endless online searching, at no extra cost.

"Many of the very best travel experiences simply aren't easy to find online," Sharon explains. "That's where I can really help – by using my expertise and supplier network to match customers with holidays they'll truly love."

In addition to holiday planning, Sharon offers advice and support with visas, entry rules, transfers, vaccinations, insurance, and seat requests.



Sharon Parkes has taken on an Explorer Travel Holidays franchise

Change of editor

Claire Pocock is the new editor of local news and features service My Shrewsbury. She has taken over from Katy Rink, who has stepped back from her role as managing editor but is continuing to contribute articles.

Claire, who is part of the Shropshire Festivals team, has been working part-time with the My Shrewsbury team for several years.

Shropshire Festivals director Beth Heath has also come on board to provide strategic support and expertise to help sustain the future of the publication's digital platform.

Claire said: "Katy created something brilliant for our town, so the most important thing for us right now is to sustain it and make it a viable business for years to come, so I hope our readers, advertisers and subscribers will continue to support us so loyally. Without your support, My Shrewsbury can't exist."

My Shrewsbury has also taken on some part-time support with Kate Rook as what's on editor and Charlotte Voyce as social media manager.

My Shrewsbury has been celebrating the town since 2017, when Katy launched the magazine. In 2025, it became fully digital, continuing to champion culture, local life and what's happening across its website, social media channels and newsletters.



Claire Pocock of My Shrewsbury

Five minutes with . . .

HAYLEY NORRGROVE is operations director at Dulson Training, the logistics industry training provider with its headquarters at Rodington. She has been with the business for eight years.

WHAT DOES YOUR JOB INVOLVE?

Leading the day-to-day operations of the business, supporting our team, driving continuous improvement, and ensuring we deliver the highest level of service to our customers.

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ECONOMY?

Economic uncertainty can affect how businesses invest in training and development, so it's important that we remain agile, demonstrate value, and continue supporting our clients' changing needs.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON HYBRID AND FLEXIBLE WORKING – IS IT STILL NEEDED, OR PRACTICAL?

Absolutely. Flexible working helps attract and retain talented people while supporting work-life balance. The key is ensuring communication, collaboration and accountability remain strong.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON YOUR BUSINESS?

AI is already helping businesses become more efficient, and training providers have an important role in helping people understand how to use it responsibly and effectively. It's a tool that can enhance productivity, not replace people.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?

Approachable, organised, supportive and someone who gets things done.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

My ability to build strong relationships while maintaining a clear focus on achieving results. I enjoy working with people, understanding different perspectives, and finding practical solutions to challenges. I'm highly-organised, proactive and resilient, which helps me stay calm under pressure and keep things moving forward when priorities are competing.

BIGGEST CURRENT CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?

Balancing continued business growth while maintaining the high standards of service and support our customers expect. As the business evolves, it's important to ensure our processes, systems and people develop alongside it, while still retaining the personal approach that has always been at the heart of what we do.

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?

Becoming a company director is my proudest professional achievement. It represents years of hard work, continuous learning, and personal growth. I'm also proud of the role I've played in helping Dulson Training develop and succeed, while supporting the growth and success of the people around me.



Molly and Diva give Hayley a chance to switch off away from work



Hayley loves Shropshire's stunning landscapes

PET HATES?

Poor communication, unnecessary meetings that could have been a quick conversation, and wasting time on things that don't add value. I like people to be open, honest and proactive, and I believe most problems can be solved with clear communication and a practical approach.

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

Believe in yourself sooner and don't underestimate what you are capable of achieving. Early in my career, I sometimes worried too much about getting everything right before taking the next step. Looking back, I'd tell myself not to be afraid of asking questions, taking opportunities, or making mistakes along the way. Some of the biggest lessons and growth come from stepping outside your comfort zone. I'd also remind myself that progress is more important than perfection and that confidence often comes from doing, rather than waiting until you feel completely ready.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?

I enjoy competing my two horses, Molly, an 11-year-old Irish Draft mare, and Diva, my five-year-old mare. I'm naturally competitive and particularly enjoy show jumping and eventing. More recently, I've started focusing on dressage with Diva, who has shown a natural talent for it. It gives me the opportunity to switch off from work, spend time outdoors, and focus on something I love.

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?

The beautiful countryside. We have some of the most stunning landscapes in the country right on our doorstep.



Hayley Norgrove



At the opening of Dulson Training's test centre in Ludlow

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?

Facebook

FAVOURITE MOVIE AND/OR TV SHOW?

It's hard to choose just one, but I enjoy a good crime drama and anything with a strong storyline and great characters.

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?

Definitely an early bird.

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUESTS, DEAD OR ALIVE?

Sir David Attenborough, Michelle Obama, Richard Branson, David Beckham and Queen Elizabeth II. I think the conversation would be fascinating.

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

Most people are surprised to learn that I have a pacemaker. It certainly wasn't something I expected at a relatively young age, but it's taught me a lot about resilience, perspective and not taking good health for granted. On a much lighter note, I also have an irrational phobia of stickers – something my family and colleagues find highly amusing!

AND FINALLY . . . WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, PROFESSIONALLY AND PERSONALLY?

Professionally, I'm looking forward to continuing to support the growth of Dulson Training, developing our team, and embracing new opportunities and technologies that help us deliver even greater value to our clients. Personally, I hope to spend more time doing what I enjoy outside of work, particularly competing Molly and Diva, and continuing our journey in dressage, show jumping and eventing. Above all, I'd like the next 12 months to be about continued growth, creating new experiences, and maintaining a healthy balance between a busy career and the things that matter most to me.

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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