

Is the Shropshire Economic Growth Strategy up to the challenge?

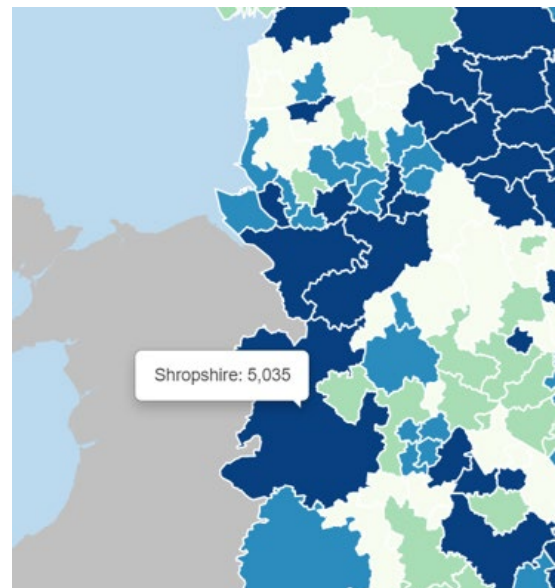
The published draft strategy is what Americans would describe as ‘motherhood and apple pie’. There are fine aspirations, but little challenge or detail. The strategy mentions no specific places and no specific sectors other than housing. Perhaps this will follow.

We Greens suggest that the strategy needs to be mission focused, with targets that are not generic growth-based figures, but specific to the various, challenges and opportunities and, frankly, crises that our local economy is facing.

Energy crisis

Our people are facing disastrous energy bills. Homes in the SY postcode rank 10th from bottom in energy efficiency. The stop-go funding from central government has failed to deliver energy efficiency and home insulation measures at the scale needed. Shropshire Council must call for more central government funds, but at the same time there is a local challenge and an opportunity. Even with the current funds available there are insufficient local suppliers and installers to do the work. Procurement is going out to well beyond the region. Meanwhile local firms continue to lack knowledge, training and long-term confidence to enable them to grow their retrofit operations. Training of younger workers continues to focus on older skills.

Beyond home energy efficiency there is the wider renewable energy sector where opportunities are being missed. How many south facing warehouses, barns and sheds in Shropshire have not yet installed solar PV? Is this not an economic opportunity? The draft strategy aims to “Provide the right tools and support to facilitate businesses to invest...”. Renewable energy should have explicit targets.



[Estimated total number of direct jobs in low-carbon and renewable energy sector \(2050\) LGA](#)

UK100 (to which Shropshire Council belongs) has demonstrated the [potential for local authorities to work with the National Infrastructure Bank on renewable energy and energy efficiency](#).

We need to insulate 20,000 homes per year, ready to switch away from fossil fuels of we are to achieve net zero by 2030. We need to see 500 acres of new solar farms per year to enable Shropshire to make its contribution to renewable energy. These targets should feature in our economic strategy.

Nature crisis

The words 'farming' and 'agriculture' are entirely missing from the draft strategy. Crop failure and economic hardship are expected to increase as the climate changes and so long as late twentieth century farming techniques continue to deplete soil health. At the same time, we have a biodiversity crisis. Meanwhile the county is due to lead on a legally required 'Local Nature Recovery Strategy'. Surely this is an economic opportunity? Community partners are working hard to promote the development of a

By establishing a nationwide network of unique habitat banks, we're launching Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Units – a groundbreaking new product that unlocks economic growth, improves nature, and gives developers a simple, risk-free way to implement BNG. Environment Bank

sustainable food economy. This must sit at the heart of an economic strategy that already includes 'enabling resilience planning' in its strategic themes.

Planners have so far not been provided with the tools to get developers to contribute meaningfully to nature recovery. Instead, small plots of greenery – which will never be verified or enforced – are being accepted as 'Biodiversity Net Gain'. But nature recovery experts say the BNG requirement should be met with investment in habitats that contribute to a meaningful, joined up, nature recovery plan. The economic opportunity here is that habitat renewal requires skilled labour, has its own economic gains, and can attract investment. There is also the clear opportunity to develop sustainable tourism opportunities that support nature recovery.

1. Main points

- Nature contributed an estimated £12 billion to tourism and outdoor leisure within the UK in 2019.
- The number of outdoor-related activities participated in across the UK rose from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion between 2011 and 2016.
- Outdoor-related activities in urban settings accounted for over 60% of all nature-based spending in 2019 within Great Britain.

1<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/tourismandoutdoorleisureaccounts/naturalcapitaluk/2021>

Economic strategy details need to include targets for promoting sustainable agriculture, for providing BNG credits for developer investment and for green tourism.

Crisis in Social Care

Health and social care are the biggest employment sectors in our economy. The lack of capacity in social care is a crisis that is affecting the whole local health care system as there has been a breakdown in the 'flow' of patients through hospitals due to non-availability of post-hospital care, whether home based or residential. Campaigners have called for an emergency injection of funds to address this crisis and Shropshire Council should certainly put its name to this call, but beyond that there is need to look at creating a larger, more resilient sector. This surely requires strategic planning in terms of training, planning, transport and affordable homes in the right places, all themes in the strategy, but without reference to this sector. We must look at how best to promote adequately paid attractive social care work, which might require some innovative thinking such as supporting a co-op model or direct council investment, with the additional objective of putting the council's finances on a more sustainable footing given the 77% commitment to social care operations.

Community Wealth Building and attractive market towns

Beyond these three critical areas there is work to do to support our SMEs and our market towns. Infrastructure for inward investment (business parks) may be part of the solution, but with retail and hospitality being the most significant employment sectors beyond the public sector and care there is clearly a need to consider carefully how to create future-ready town centres which can attract sustainable tourism as well as local enjoyment. Crucially, these enterprises typically are not 'extractive': the wealth created in them is more likely to stay in the county than is the case with inward investment from afar. This 'community wealth building' approach to economic wellbeing should be at the heart of our economic thinking as a council. This can inform how we procure, and how we talk to the 'anchor institutions' in our county about how they too can support local enterprises.

Given that we have an aging population and a shrinking younger workforce, there is also an opportunity here to focus on improved prospects for young workers. Many of our young people will have their first taste of work in the hospitality and retail sector, possibly with local independents. Both the enterprises themselves and the young workers need the information and support to ensure these experiences are good ones. We know, directly from young people, that this is not always the case. The draft strategy already includes an aim to "continue to work with schools, colleges and businesses to develop and retain young talent alongside increasing employer engagement and take up of apprenticeships in SME's, but this needs to drill down to sectors where skills and prospects are less good and where there is a need for young workers. **Qualitative assessment should be developed that can provide evidence for an improving young worker experience, whilst quantitative targets, which are sector specific, can include apprenticeship and training take-up.**

The experience of the near car-free town centres during the pandemic and beyond has shown that this increases vibrancy and spending. 'Infrastructure' investment must have this as a focus. The mentions of public transport in the draft strategy are welcome, **but we need to see a target for the shift to active travel and public transport, and we need to ditch out-of-date cost-benefit analysis that is used to excuse road building.**

The words hospitality and retail don't appear in the draft strategy. Neither do the names of our market towns. **The next iteration could include targets for car free visits and footfall in each market town that would show a commitment to sustainable development of each and every town in the county.**

This is by no means an exhaustive discussion of where the economic strategy should be missions focused. The Green group are of the view that general 'growth' targets are worth little and potentially damaging. Instead, we need a focus on specifics. These are not easy 'missions', but precisely because they are the problem areas they warrant energy, imagination, and commitment.