

Church Stretton Town Council

Response to Shropshire Council

Economic Growth Strategy for Shropshire

Collated by Economic Development Committee

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Respondent Information

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It is helpful that Shropshire Council sets out its vision and key development priorities for the local economy but some of the statements are at such a high level that they will need some explication in order to be meaningful. Shropshire has long been short-changed by central government, which has particular needs as a sparsely-populated rural area. It has failed to establish a distinctive identity, either nationally or internationally, which may partly explain this lack of national investment. It has the landscape to match the Lake District and Peak District but it has lacked county-co-ordinated marketing and key infra-structure, such as hotels. It is to be hoped that the embryonic Tourism and Natural Environment Group, Discover Shropshire, will begin to address this deficiency, appealing to all ages, not only in terms of walking but of outdoor adventure, possibly linked to an emphasis on green tourism – renewable energy and electric cars. Electric buses connecting the towns could reduce the ever-increasing traffic volume. Local food and drink, cultural activities and creative arts can enrich the mix. In any event, the development of the visitor economy needs to have a higher priority, promoting Shropshire to a wider audience both in the UK and abroad.

There is insufficient recognition in the Report that economic development needs to be integrated with other development strategies for housing, education and leisure, as well as transport and infrastructure. The major employment sites and growth corridors should be carefully developed so as not to change the character of the area, concentrating, wherever possible, on brownfield, as opposed to greenfield, sites. Existing key employment sites should be maintained and improved. Developing new serviced employment sites should be carefully chosen, where there is easy access to road and rail links and where there is land available to build housing to support a growing workforce. Development in housing and businesses needs to be planned with a realistic approach to utility capacity. Housing is currently being built, in some parts, with little regard to the Edwardian infrastructure provision underground.

The Government's White Paper 'Fixing our broken housing' says: "Make more land available for homes in the right places, by maximising the contribution from brownfield and surplus public land, regenerating estates, releasing more small and medium sized sites, allowing rural communities to grow and making it easier to build new settlements; "

For economic development purposes, there are effectively three sub-areas in the county, the north, the central band and the south, each offering different challenges and opportunities. It is recognised that HS2 will primarily benefit the north and west of the county but more pressure needs to be applied to Highways England to allow more access points off the A49, more overtaking points to improve both safety and traffic flow in the north and south of the county. Improved rail connectivity is also important, especially to the south of the county, with greater pressure on the Welsh Assembly, which controls the franchise, to consider not only Welsh but English interests, linking more effectively with the West Coast line.

Even within the three main sub-areas, there are very different market towns and hinterlands, each of which has to identify the balance to be struck between economic development and environmental conservation, which is the basis of, arguably, their biggest industry, tourism. In this context, especially with regard to south Shropshire, it is surprising that there is no reference in the Strategy to the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). In this regard, the farming industry receives little attention in the Report but, like many other industries, it may need significant support to cope with the Brexit outcome.

Given the diversity of towns in the county and the ongoing cutback in the funding of Shropshire Council, there needs to be greater recognition that Town Councils will have to play an increasing role in economic development. In order to take up this responsibility, they will need support from Shropshire Council in the training of staff and councillors and in the provision of information, such as directories of local businesses, so that they can work in partnership with those businesses, facilitate networking and/or supportive resource centres and incubator units, possibly linked to incentive schemes. Wherever possible, such initiatives should seek to re-use existing buildings, resisting the current trend of destroying historic burgh plots to re-build.

As this report begins to recognise, the role of Shropshire Council will increasingly be at a strategic level in promoting collaboration between higher education institutions and businesses and in improving the transport infrastructure and the Broadband connectivity across the county. Although progress has been made on the latter, the recent Initial Summary Report of the Tourism Cooperation Project in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow still describes Broadband connectivity in that part of the county as “astonishingly poor” and that has major implications not only for tourism but the large number of home-based entrepreneurs in that area. As much of the economic growth in the coming years is going to be internet-based, this is the over-riding issue on which much faster progress is needed and that includes the development of skills in digital marketing. The Shropshire Council could look into the provision of Broadband via satellite for those who live in ‘not spots’ throughout the county. Digital connectivity is not a ‘nice to have’ it is now a necessity.

Given that Shropshire has a strong elderly bias in its population, it is encouraging that the Report recognises the scope for developing new assistive technologies in health and social care, particularly given the rural dispersion of the population. Innovative ways of using the skills and experience of the retirement population need to be developed to aid the viability of rural communities but that needs to be complemented by the development of genuinely affordable accommodation for families, linked to employment opportunities, to begin to redress the demographic imbalance.

Economic development also has to have regard to the creation of work opportunities for different skill levels. In the south of the county, in particular, the encouragement of boutique hotels would not only boost local economies but also the range of employment opportunities. More work needs to be done with schools, to make children aware of the local employment opportunities.

**Conclusion:** Church Stretton Town Council welcomes this Report in assisting Shropshire Council to focus its reduced staffing resources for economic development to best effect but hopes that it will mark the beginning of a developing dialogue with Town Councils on how they can also contribute to this economic development agenda.