

Big Conversation Survey 2016/17

Theme Analysis

Prosperous Economy



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This paper summarises the Big Conversation 2016/17 results for the theme Prosperous Economy.

The work undertaken on the Big Conversation 2016/17 is reflected in a number of different reports. The reports include a full report of all the survey feedback, reports on the work undertaken to engage with specific groups and communities of interest (those who were not as well engaged in 2015/16) and a short summary of the main issues raised. Please use the website and contact details at the end to find out more.

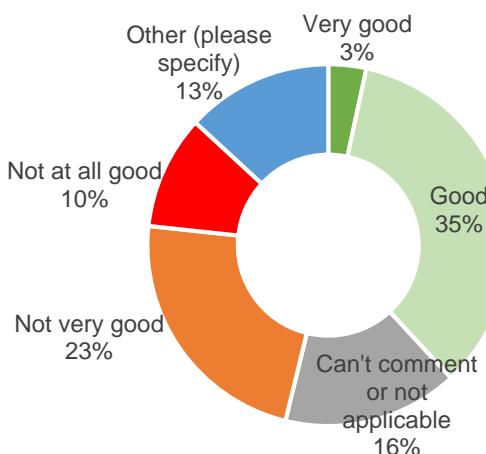
Prosperous Economy

In total 276 respondents completed the Big Conversation Survey 2016/17 the survey responses for the Prosperous Economy theme are shown below. The section on page 4 'Targeted Engagement by Project Partners' summarises the economic related responses from the 722 people were engaged in discussions, workshops and surveys designed to engage with people who were not well represented within the Big Conversation 2015/16.

Based on your experience and the information provided, how would you rate our work on making our economy more prosperous?

- Opinion is divided over how well the Council is doing in its work to make the economy more prosperous. 38% feel the work is very good or good and 33% of the survey respondents feel the work is not very good or not at all good.
- The written comments help with developing an understanding this split of opinion and the nature of the issues involved.

How would you rate our work on making our economy more prosperous?



- A significant number of survey respondents commented that the Council should consider business rate increases carefully because they could result in the loss of businesses and hinder economic growth. This suggests that people do not understand that business rates are set by Government.
- Broadband was another main theme with respondents asking for significant improvements.
- Other comments (made by more than one respondent) included:
 - Positive comments on the Council's work to consider more sustainable sources of energy.
 - Business support is generally good but in addition seed finance and loans are needed.
 - Requests to tackle low wages and underemployment.
 - A need to balance housing provision with employment opportunities and ensure housing is affordable.

What could Shropshire Council do to make the local economy more prosperous?

The common issues raised with the comments were:

Visitor Economy

- Encourage tourism.
- Keep visitor information offices open.
- Promote the area to both tourists and residents to encourage local spending.

Roads, Transport and Parking

- Improve public transport so allow people to access employment opportunities etc.
- Improve roads, transport infrastructure and access (ensure an integrated approach to works and improvements).
- Build the North West Relief Road.
- Accept that people need cars in Shropshire and try to make access easier to car users.
- Reduce town centre parking charges.

Infrastructure and Services

- Broadband and mobile connectivity (this was a dominant theme within the comments – closer analysis suggests that comments were spread across a wide range of post code areas with the SY2, SY4 and WV16 post code areas featuring more than others).
- Digital skills so that all can access services online.

Investment

- Invest in improving high streets and town centres (try to avoid empty premises).
- Invest in particular areas. Examples include:
 - Meole Brace retail area (also a comment that there is poor mobile signal in this area).
 - Parking and public transport access for Shrewsbury Business Park.
 - Develop land owned by the Council.
 - Any opportunities linked to HS2.
- Invest in business units and build grow on spaces for our thriving businesses.
- Try to attract a large employer or two.
- Focus on attracting new business.
- Challenge the Government over its investment in rural areas.
- Give communities more control over local budgets.
- Stop all the severe cutbacks. Investment is important.
- Avoid outsourcing.
- Consider money flows and how to retain money within the area.

Business Support

- Develop relationships with local businesses.
- Reduce business charges – rates, rent etc. Avoid empty premises and properties.
- Support start-ups and new enterprises with business advice, grants and loans.
- The Council provides some helpful resources for businesses (website, templates, advice/support clinics) but other local businesses don't know about them – they are hard to find.
- Protect small businesses especially with regard to planning. Ensure planning conditions are complied with.
- Support existing businesses while attracting new (recognising the importance of SMEs).
- Better promote local business and use local businesses to keep investment local.

Skills and Employment

- Develop apprenticeships.
- Invest in volunteer recruitment and management for activity such as tourism.
- Help the voluntary sector with funding bids/taking over services.
- Make use of volunteers to tidy areas.
- Consider how a focus on generating opportunities for young people could lead to better economic prosperity.

Assets, Environment and Rurality

- Make better use of the assets we have (Quarry Park used as an example).
- Further develop the environmental services sector within the county.
- Don't focus on urban areas and forget the economic issues in rural areas.
- Develop green energy opportunities.
- Achieve a balance between encouraging investment opportunities and maintaining the rural character in a sustainable way.

Other

- Provide affordable housing.
- Speed up decision making processes to allow initiatives and programmes to be delivered more quickly and efficiently.
- Learn from other areas which are more successful.

We work with local businesses and others to encourage investment in Shropshire. Do you see any barriers or opportunities to improve economic prosperity in Shropshire?

- Commonly mentioned barriers to economy prosperity included:
 - Traffic problems and access to town centres
 - Rural transport
 - Lack of adequate road and rail infrastructure
 - Broadband access
 - Mobile phone connectivity
 - Planning process (speed) and opposition to applications
 - Low wages
 - High business rents from commercial landlords
 - Limited public transport
 - Car parking fees
 - Even if housing was built the jobs and infrastructure are not there (doctors, clinics, schools hospitals are overloaded)
 - Ageing population
 - Lack of a clear, jointly shared vision
 - Poor planning decisions/ the Council as a barrier
 - Poor communication and marketing by the Council
 - Cost savings/ budget reductions

- More specific opportunities mentioned included:
 - Expanding the wheels 2 work scheme (Shropshire Rural Communities Charity).
 - Extend car sharing schemes.
 - Making better use of assets owned by Shropshire Council.
 - Courses at the University could be aimed at subjects which could benefit Shropshire.
 - The Council could use its influence to try and resolve issues with very high business rents.
 - Smarten shop frontages and high streets.
 - Offer more business units.
 - Provide business loans.
 - Developing a greater mix of skills.
 - Incentives, information, advice, support and guidance for establishing social enterprise, cooperatives and community benefit societies.
 - 'Bottom up' approaches rather than a 'top down' focus.

What would encourage you to support local businesses, services and amenities more than you currently do?

The common issues raised with the comments were:

- A large proportion of respondents already actively support local shops: and buy locally.
- Cheaper parking to make access to town centres more attractive than free supermarket parking.
- Reduction of town centre congestion.
- Investment in park and ride.
- Improved local bus services (reliability and extended travel times are key themes mentioned by respondents).
- Improved access generally with cycle routes and choice in terms of travel options.
- Better customer service from local businesses and improved professional standards.
- A greater mix of shops (avoiding a dominance of charity shops on high streets).
- More attractive town centres (without too many empty premises).
- Some town centres appear to be dying.
- Longer opening hours (for shops and services (health services included in examples)).
- Affordability is important. Local business need to compete with prices offered out of area.
- Better promotion and marketing of local businesses, services and amenities (lots of comments to suggest that if people knew more about local businesses and services they would support them).
- Many local businesses don't have an online presence.
- Try to stop national chains from taking over the high street.
- High quality/unique/ specialist shops (e.g. organic food outlets).
- Much longer opening hours, especially on Sundays.
- Leadership from the Council to demonstrate:
 - how new business can be created
 - how business income can be reinvested into local areas
 - how people can support businesses and services within their local area
 - how small local businesses and social enterprises can be supported

Targeted Engagement by Project Partners

In addition to the survey, targeted engagement took place in early 2017 with the following groups:

- Children and young people under the age of 25.
- Carers and people using services likely to be most impacted by future changes (including those over the age of 75).

- People who either do not have the skills and equipment to complete online surveys or choose not to engage online.
- People with a disability that make the completion of online surveys and engagement more difficult.
- People on lower incomes likely to find the self-funding of services difficult.

The targeted engagement work was undertaken by:

- Carers Trust 4All (Carers)
- Shropshire Housing Support Group with Shropshire Council's Adult Social Care (People on lower incomes, those who would find self-funding services and people who find online surveys difficult).
- Taking Part (People with a disability or find the completion of online surveys difficult).
- Shropshire Council's Community Enablement Team and Business Design Team (Young people aged under 25).

722 participated in the targeted engagement work, and in relation to the Your Economy theme, they commented:

- Broadband speeds are too slow and services are patchy.
- Public transport is an issue for all groups.
 - Lack of services in rural areas
 - Lack of wheelchair accessible buses
 - Irregular services
 - Accessing work, support meetings, health services, sporting activities, training and courses, food shops and socialising with friends can be difficult. Public transport is seen as a lifeline.
- Local business could do more to encourage people with disabilities to shop locally.
 - Local shops and businesses are missed when they close down.
- Green spaces are valued but people feel that their local green spaces could be used more effectively.
- Young people comment that they'll need to leave Shropshire when they're older (for education/jobs/lifestyle/to spread their wings).
- Affordable housing - rent and paying bills is a concern.
- Comments on rough sleepers included the need for more timely support and that the Council should do more to address the issue.

Please see the full Big Conversation Project Partners reports for all the information gathered and a more detailed description of the issues raised within the Big Conversation targeted engagement.

Summary of main issues: Prosperous Economy

- Broadband and mobile investment
- Tourism
- Reduced cost of town centre parking
- Public transport access to town centres
- Support to improve vibrancy of high streets
- Buying locally and supporting local services

- Promoting local businesses and services more effectively.
- Affordable housing.
- Attracting business to the county to boost employment.

Example Comments

“To be economically resilient, this area needs genuinely affordable housing for the younger generation and more local business start-ups and employment opportunities”.

“Shropshire has a transport problem, the more remote you are the bigger the problem. It is catch 22. You want people to take work and contribute, they can't because they are isolated.”

“Unemployment may be relatively low but wages are poor and there is a high lever of underemployment, where people are working in low paid and/or part time jobs”.

“Rates for businesses are too expensive and therefore businesses are closing and properties are remaining closed”.

“Charging more business tax for small business is not the answer - they are struggling now”.

“I see internet provision being vital to attract new businesses”.

“High Streets are suffering, empty shop premises help no one, business rates are crippling local small business, this needs addressing”.

“There is no support for tourism but every tourist helps the local economy by supporting businesses that provide accommodation, attractions etc. Even small B&Bs buy local and support local businesses. Visitors want to see lively towns not empty shops, make rateable values realistic”.

“More promotion of Shropshire as a place to do business.”

“Better infrastructure...a connected transport system. Businesses will not come here without it!”

“Promote and maximise Shropshire's greatest asset, which is... its environment...”

Contact Us

For more information concerning the Big Conversation results please contact Shropshire Council's Commissioning Support Unit.

 **Website:** <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/big-conversation/>

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