ISSUE 3

Objective 2

PROJECTS UPDATE

Centres boost villages

Two major community enterprise projects have enhanced the lives of village people in the north and west of the county.

St Martins now has a new community centre which is a project driven by enthusiastic local involvement.

"This is a large former mining village, where the demise of the industry left villagers with no central facilities, but a strong community spirit that resulted in a charity for community projects being established in 1997." says Maldwyn Evans, Oswestry Borough Council Community Development Officer.

The new community centre (pictured above) has a wealth of amenities including a main hall, kitchen, office, foyer room and an excellently equipped IT training room. The centre is built on an area used as play space, close to a football pitch and the facilities also incorporate changing rooms and toilets to support local sports and leisure. In addition, there is plenty of storage space to accommodate the ever growing and wide variety of activities and groups developing in the village. Objective 2 funding has also allowed the centre to have the support of a project co-ordinator to ensure that the project continues to be successful.

Maldwyn continued "Training opportunities were a key area of the project, and we are working with Walford and North Shropshire College to build up training links,"

Equally important to the project are youth activities, which were flourishing well before the centre was completed. Maldwyn praises the hard work of the St Martins youth workers, who set up links with two other similar groups in the area.

The St Martins project attracted £100,000 from Objective 2.

Llanyblodwel is a very different kind of community, more rural in character, with a lower population density, but the need for community facilities was still very important.

"The large village hall was well established, but needed refurbishment," stated Maldwyn. "The interior was improved with Lottery money, but the exterior badly needed attention."

The resulting project has seen a total transformation of the hall, with new roof, cladding and steel frame, plus an improved access road, parking and lighting. The size of the hall makes it an ideal space for training, and Walford and North Shropshire College are among regular users. The change at the village hall has revitalised the community as well as being a major topic of conversation!

The project attracted £126,000 Objective 2 capital funding.

Contact Maldwyn Evans on 01691 677317, e-mail Maldwyn.Evans@oswestry-bc.gov.uk

David Lloyd , Mayor of Oswestry Borough (Centre) and Cllr Sheila Bruce (Second Left) with members of Llanyblodwel and Porthywaen Memorial Hall Management Committee.

Enterprise House an instant hit

Building on the resources and enthusiasm of the community in Bishop's Castle led to the opening of a new business and training centre at Enterprise House, an existing community and business support centre in the South Shropshire town.

The former factory building now houses an additional three offices for rent, a meeting room and computer training suite. The total refurbishment was supported by £98,944 from Objective 2.

"We share the building with the local library and we already had a resource centre here with some office space for rent so there is always a lot of activity going on," says Development Manager Anne-Marie Jackson. "but we were aware of additional demand. This project brought extra, much needed facilities under one roof."

The new long-term office suites were let soon after work was completed in November, and the additional training and meeting facilities at Enterprise House have quickly become a busy and important part of Bishop's Castle life.

More information from Mike Ashwell on 01588 638038 or e-mail mashwell@bishopscastle.co.uk

Mike Ashwell gives some IT instructon to Liv Goode

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GROWING SKILLS AT GARDEN CENTRE

A joint project with a privately owned retail garden centre is generating training opportunities at Shipley, near Bridgnorth.

As part of the Severn Valley Package, with support from Bridgnorth District Council, a former indoor rifle range at the centre has been leased out and converted into a training centre.

Walford and North Shropshire College leads the training, and 220 people have already enrolled to study tourism, horticulture, floristry, IT, and other subjects. "They include a lot of mature students on part-time and evening courses," says the college's Phil Ridley.

"The centre is outside Shipley on the Wolverhampton-Bridgnorth road, next door to the Gardenland garden centre. Despite its rural location it is easily accessible by car or public transport.

"In the past the College has had to close centres which catered purely for farmers because of the decline of the agriculture industry. We are pleased to be moving back out again to meet the training needs of the wider rural community," adds Phil.

The building work started in May 2003, and the first students started in September. The centre was officially opened by local MP Matthew Green in October.

£170,000 in capital support came from Objective 2.

Contact Phil Ridley on 01939 262154, e-mail p.ridley@wnsc.ac.uk

Sandra Wood, Kate Rowe and Eileen Avery, tutor

Tourism action stations!

Objective 2 funding has scored some notable successes in tourism, where the programme has helped to tap into the energy, enterprise and innovative spirit of the industry in Shropshire through its contribution to the county's Tourism Action Plan.

In total, there are three plans, including Creative industries and Regenerating Communities, but Tourism has been the first to get off the ground. The whole concept and approach of the Action Plans is unique and it brings together funds from a variety of sources. These funds have been allocated specifically to large, strategic projects which will have a significant impact within Shropshire.

The Tourism Action Plan funding now totals nearly £2.5m, of which over £1m has already been allocated to projects. 15 project applications have been submitted for funding and eight have been approved.

The aim of the funding is to boost the county's tourism industry by attracting more visitors who stay longer and spend more; to raise awareness of Shropshire as a visitor destination, and to establish a co-ordinated approach to tourism development.

The Tourism Action Plan will create a stronger identity and sense of place for the county. In getting Shropshire's messages right, it will help to ensure that visitors stay longer, spend more and enjoy return visits.

Another project is a unique research unit, with two full-time officers gathering statistics to inform tourism development.

Accurate data on accommodation occupancy and visitor volume and value are not available elsewhere. The unit will also commission strategic studies to help gain maximum value from the Action Plan.

Other approved projects include development studies to look into Acton Scott Working Farm Museum and the Secret Hills Discovery Centre at Craven Arms. With support to improve facilities and infrastructure, both of these venues have the potential to attain major national prestige.

Another project is the setting-up of a Festival and Events Grant Pot. Shropshire has a wide variety of festivals and events which attract thousands of visitors to the county each year. By offering grants of up to £10,000, the aim is to help them stand on their own feet economically and encourage them to play a more effective role in Shropshire's joined-up tourism strategy.

As a general principle of the Action Plan, the landscape will be promoted as the primary appeal of the area, underlying all other themes and activities.

Developments and initiatives must be appropriate in scale and complement the character of Shropshire.

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Shropshire Partnership

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European Social Fund

Advantage West Midlands

Government Office for the West Midlands

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£3.7m campaign to speed up internet links

SOS – the Switch on Shropshire campaign – has £3.7 million in funding to help bring high-speed broadband internet links to businesses and communities in rural parts of the county. A further £1.1 million is being sought from the private sector.

£2.1 million of the money comes from Objective 2. The funding will be used to promote the use of broadband by small to medium enterprises, with grants of up to 50% for computers and broadband connections.

It will also provide 35 community "Broadplaces," in rural areas with PCs offering free access for communities to the internet and e-mail.

SOS is also commissioning research into satellite, wireless and other technologies to bring broadband to areas which do not have appropriate telephone exchange equipment.

"The current lack of affordable broadband services in rural Shropshire is a substantial barrier to business growth and to economic regeneration," says Phil Box, County Council Cabinet Member for e-Governance. "The availability and use of affordable broadband services will enhance business competitiveness."

Last year's Commons report to the DEFRA committee on Rural Broadband said that slow progress towards the government's vision of broadband had "allowed a digital divide to open up between urban and rural areas in terms of the availability of broadband."

Paul Nash, Project Manager for Switch On Shropshire, believes there is more than one digital divide. "There will be those who have adopted and adapted to the technology and used it to transform their businesses and those who cannot yet see the point," he says.

He adds that another divide will be between those with access to broadband speeds and services best suited to mission-critical business applications – and those without.

Rural broadband services also offer important social benefits, including helping to preserve local communities and schools. They also improve access to learning materials for children and adults, to culture and to information or e-government services

The SOS campaign, managed by Shropshire Council, is working with partners including the Community Council of Shropshire, British Telecom, Shropshire Chamber of Commerce and Business Link.

The digital divide

The digital divide between urban and rural businesses is a very real problem which SOS meets head-on.

The countryside agency report "The State of the Countryside 2003" indicates that:

7% of rural villages and 1% of remote rural areas have access to affordable broadband internet connections compared with 95% of the urban population and 67% of the UK population.

6% of surveyed rural businesses use affordable broadband solutions compared with 17% of surveyed urban businesses.

During 2002 85% of rural businesses surveyed had access to the internet and 81% of rural businesses used external e-mail compared with 92% and 89% of the urban businesses respectively.

BROADBAND BUSINESS BENEFITS

- **Better, cheaper IT: faster connectivity facilitates increased online transactions**
- **Closer links to suppliers, partners, distributors, customers and advisers: broadband draws businesses closer together.**
- **Support for flexible working: teams can collaborate while geographically dispersed.**
- **Geographical independence: a project or management team can be split between locations and travel minimised, rather than being an unsupportable overhead.**
- **Opportunities for new products and services: broadband offers opportunities for new sorts of products and services, especially digitally distributed ones.**
- **Opportunities for cost reductions: streamlined business processes through more efficient information flow.**

Businesses in the eligible area of Shropshire should register their interest through Business Link and the BT website. For more information contact the SOS Project Office.

Switch on SHROPSHIRE

Paul Nash, SOS Manager, on 01743 252299

e-mail sos@shropshire-cc.gov.uk

Website: www.switchonshropshire.org.uk

Local rate calls from South Shropshire on (01584) 871400

Local rate calls from North Shropshire on (01939) 238100

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce and Business Link contact: Zoe Slattery on 01952 208263

Attracting funds for community's own castle

Historic Whittington Castle is unique in the UK in being owned and managed by the local community. Recent Objective 2 funding is helping to boost the site as a visitor attraction.

Oswestry Borough Council's community tourism initiative has led work on several heritage and nature sites in the borough, including Whittington Castle, a 13th century building with roots in the Iron Age.

"European funding has helped us invest in professional help with refurbishment, developing audio-visual and other educational aids, and in appointing a project manager," says Alec Hayward, a Director of the Preservation Trust which was set up in 1999.

"We have a long list of work we want to carry out at the castle, including replacing the café, developing an education centre in the gatehouse, replacing the drawbridge to give disabled access, refurbishing the Elizabethan Cottage and general landscaping and ecology around the moat.

"The £75,000 we received in Objective 2 funding provided the opportunity to put together a package to apply for Heritage Lottery funding to support these important projects."

Contact Steve Evans on 01691 677221 or e-mail Steve.Evans@oswestry-bc.gov.uk. Visit the preservation trust website: www.whittingtoncastle.co.uk

LETTING OFF SELF-ESTEEM AT CRAVEN ARMS

Stella Mitchell outside the former market hall, one of the town's magnificent buildings now brought back to life as a museum of popular culture.

A major scheme is under way to smarten up a south Shropshire town, enhancing local confidence and boosting business and tourism.

Craven Arms, on the A49 between Shrewsbury and Ludlow, has built up a £500,000 fund for its improvement strategy. Conceived in 1995, this exercise identified 38 sites needing attention.

The town has a reputation for unsightly buildings and land use.

"That reputation affects local people's confidence and has economic consequences," says Market Towns Initiative Projects Officer Matt Smith.

"Under the Initiative, we ran a 'health check' on Craven Arms in 2001, and most of the 38 sites were included in an action plan. At heart, the town has some superb buildings and strong community spirit; the work on those unappealing areas will really make a difference."

Local resident, Kay Poole at the station, which is due for a make-over.

For example, one scheme will screen an electricity sub station and establish a picnic area in woodland close to the A49, improving the vista for drivers entering the town.

"We also have large-scale tree-planting and lighting improvements; we're enhancing town centre street furniture to bring out the best elements of the Victorian conservation area."

Other Objective 2 supported projects include improvements to the station, agreed between rail users and Network Rail, and a make-over for Long Lane Industrial Estate, now called Craven Arms Business Park.

"Companies on the site and its owners have approved signage and landscaping changes which will raise its prestige," says Matt.

He adds: "The visual problem with Craven Arms has been a lack of consistency in buildings, street furniture, even trees. By bringing back a vernacular, we can make a big impact."

More than 70 local people took part in walks, forums and organising questionnaires to put together a design statement for the town.

"This is about to be agreed as supplementary planning guidance, setting out criteria for building materials, landscaping, colours and street furniture. It will serve to maintain a better-looking Craven Arms well beyond the remaining 18 months of the project."

Funding for the scheme includes £90,000 from Ojective 2.

Telephone Matt Smith on 01588 673992 or e-mail matt.smith@southshropshire.gov.uk

Severn Centre takes shape

Highley's £2.7 million community and leisure centre project is coming together, with a new name, a business manager appointed and construction work well under way.

"This is an exciting time for the people of Highley, who can even watch their centre taking shape from the comfort of home – Bridgnorth District Council have set up a webcam on www.bridgnorth-dc.gov.uk."

"We're calling the building 'The Severn Centre,'" says Mike Baker, who has led the project for Bridgnorth District Council and is its new Business Manager.

"The foundations, drainage and steel structure are in place. We're on target for a 26th July handover and the official opening on 11th September; we're getting the Olympics out of the way first."

Residents of the former mining village have been closely involved throughout the process. Mike worked on the scheme with Highley Local Project Group and the Highley Welfare Committee, representing local groups and associated organisations including the library Service and health sector.

The project generated community activities as the actual building was being designed and conceived. A multi-use games and sport area has been in use at the site, close to Highley Welfare Centre, hosting football, tennis, netball, crown green bowls, arts and crafts activities and council-run summer holiday activities.

Contact Mike Baker on 01746 713239, e-mail mbaker@bridgnorthdc.gov.uk

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