

# FULL COUNCIL

4 APRIL 2023

## REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

### 1. COUNCIL UPDATE REGARDING CABINET

#### 1.1 Purpose of Report

To advise Council of the main decisions taken at the Cabinet meetings on 9 February and 9 March 2023.

#### 1.2 Background

1.2.1 This report highlights some of those decisions which have been made, but not all. Members wishing to view all decisions made can find these at <http://eservices.solihull.gov.uk/mgInternet/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1>

1.2.2 Attached to this report are the lists of decisions made.

#### 1.3 Decisions – 9 February 2023

1.3.1 **Council Tax Support Fund 2023/24** – This was a new fund, announced by Government and applied to 2023/24, to provide support to vulnerable households in England, including those receiving Council Tax support. Cabinet approved the automatic rewarding of up to £25 to existing LCTS claimants, as well as for new LCTS claimants who became eligible in 2023/24.

1.3.2 **Council Tax Premiums for Empty Properties and Second Homes** – As part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, authorities were now allowed to charge a 100% long-term empty premium on properties once they had been empty for 12 months, instead of the current 24 months. This also applied for 100% Council Tax premium for second homes. The aim was to increase housing supply and encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Cabinet was asked to note that owners could apply for a reduction if they could prove they were actively trying to bring their property back into use.

1.3.3 Cabinet recommended that Full Council approve the 100% Council Tax premium for long-term empty properties be applied with effect from 1 April 2024 and to defer any decision for 100% Council Tax for second homes to a later date.

1.3.4 **Business Rates Relief 2023/24** – Members approved both the Council's Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief Scheme for 2023/24 and the Council's Transitional Relief and Supporting Small Business Relief for 2023/24.

1.3.5 **Housing Revenue Account Estimates and Rent Increases 2023/24** – Cabinet was invited to consider the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget estimates for 2023/24, the Management Fee payable to Solihull Community Housing (SCH) and the proposed changes in dwelling and garage rents and leaseholder management fees for 2023/24.

1.3.6 The proposed HRA rent increase of 5% was approved. Members also approved the SCH 5-year rolling Management Agreement increase of 12.23% and the increase in garage rents and Leaseholder Management Fees.

1.3.7 **Medium-Term Financial Strategy Period 9 Update Report (to 31 December 2022)** – Cabinet received and noted the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) latest financial position as at 31 December 2022 (Period 9).

- 1.3.8 Cabinet approved the use of the Budget Strategy Reserve to fund the additional cost for the 2022/23 Pay Award, the increase in the Impairment Allowance and the shortfall in the Children and Education Portfolio.
- 1.3.9 Approval was given to using reserves from the Commonwealth Games to fund the current Voluntary and Community Sector priorities and to contribute to the Leisure reserves. The creation of a new reserve for the Learning Disability Employment Support service was approved.
- 1.3.10 **Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 to 2025/26** – Cabinet reviewed and recommended that Full Council approve the Council’s carbon budget, as outlined in the report; the fees and charges for each portfolio; an increase of 2.99% in the level of general Council Tax in 2023/24; an increase of 2% in the social care precept in 2023/24; and a budget for 2023/24 of £199.250 million.

#### **1.4 Decisions – 9 March 2023**

##### **1.4.1 Council Housing Asset Management Strategy –**

1.4.2 **Housing Capital Programme 2023/24** – Cabinet approved the Housing Capital Programme for 2023/24. Members noted the availability of additional resources through prudential borrowing, subject to required approvals. Cabinet approved an allocation of £1.450 million to SCH to meet statutory Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) demand, as well as SCH contracts over £2.500 million.

1.4.3 **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** – Members were asked to consider the Council’s approach to deploying the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) between 2022-25, which had been administered by the WM Combined Authority (WMCA) to support Community and Place and People and Skills priorities. Officers had consulted with Solihull College focusing on the need to upskill the existing workforce.

1.4.4 Cabinet approved Solihull’s UKSPF Delivery Plan; the allocations of the funding agreements for UKSPF and Multiply for 2022-25; and the partnership approach with Solihull College to the Multiply Programme in Solihull.

1.4.5 **Update on Applications to Funding Bodies that Support the Council’s Priorities** – Cabinet noted the four specific external funding submissions to support the delivery of the Council’s priorities. Project A - to deliver Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure; Project B – Chelmsley Wood 15 Minute Neighbourhood to develop and implement a plan to establish a place-based approach to decarbonisation; Project C – Chelmsley Wood Town Centre North-West Quarter Redevelopment Phase 1 to identify funding to support the next stage of the scheme development; and Project D – M42 and West Coast Main Line Multi-Modal Transport Bridges to identify the preferred route and infrastructure to improve connectivity across the UKC Hub to HS2 Interchange Station.

1.4.6 **Solihull Connected Transport Strategy** – Cabinet was asked to note and approve the feedback received following public and stakeholder consultation on the Council’s draft transport strategy and its delivery plan. Officers noted Members’ comments and confirmed that amendments would be made to the Solihull Connected Transport Strategy and Delivery Plan.

1.4.7 **Housing Strategy** – Cabinet received a report setting out the Council and SCH Housing Strategy and Implementation Plan for Solihull, following public consultation. Following discussion, approval was given to the Solihull Housing Strategy 2023-32 and the Implementation Plan 2023-25.

1.4.8 **Solihull Town Centre Low Carbon Energy Network (‘Energy Network’)**– Cabinet was provided with the outcome of the commercialisation stage of the Solihull’s Energy Network project, considering the Full Business Case for Phase 1 of the network development. Members were advised that a heat network in Solihull Town Centre offered the opportunity of significant reductions in CO2 emissions.

- 1.4.9 It was noted that the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board had supported the proposal, having considered the contribution carbon savings from the heat network would make on the Borough.
- 1.4.10 Members were advised that the risk of not proceeding meant the Council would lose Government funding and would impact on how the Council would deliver carbon savings. Officers advised on what the future expansion could be and the requirement to go beyond Phase 1.
- 1.4.11 Cabinet gave approval to proceed with the delivery of the project, having taken into account all the various associated financial aspects, and endorsed Solihull Energy Ltd enter into a contract with Vital Energi Ltd as detailed in the report.

## **1.5 Other Issues, Meetings, News and Events of Interest**

- 1.5.1 **Trailblazing Deeper Devolution Deal** - A proposed new Trailblazer deeper devolution deal between Government and the West Midlands Combined Authority was announced as part of the Spring Budget. This presents some real opportunities for Solihull. It covers a range of themes, including climate change, transport and affordable housing. I particularly welcome the announcement of a Levelling Up Zone for East Birmingham and North Solihull, with the ability to retain 100% of Business Rates for 25 years. This should enable us to make great progress in connecting the opportunities at the UK Central Hub with our residents. I hope the £100m Single Regeneration Fund will also offer good opportunities for projects in the Borough. Members will be considering the details of the Deal in due course.
- 1.5.2 **Children's Commissioner Report** - On 17 March 2023, the Children's Commissioner, Sir Alan Wood, issued his report and recommendations for the future delivery of Children's Services in Solihull. This makes a number of recommendations which we have fully accepted.
- 1.5.3 I am pleased that within his report, Sir Alan has noted the closer working in recent months with the two other lead safeguarding partners and the regular meetings that I have established with the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chair of the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board.
- 1.5.4 Alongside the Commissioner's report, the Department for Education issued a new statutory direction which gives the statutory backing to the Commissioner's recommendations. Within this direction, it is pleasing to see that the Secretary of State for Education has acknowledged that we have worked constructively with the Commissioner.