

FULL COUNCIL

8 DECEMBER 2020

REPORT OF THE LEADER

1. COUNCIL UPDATE ON THE ECONOMIC STRATEGY RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE LEADER'S PORTFOLIO

1.1 Purpose of Report

To inform Council of matters of interest in relation to the economic strategy responsibilities of my portfolio. My report focuses on the continued development and delivery of the plan to support the Borough's economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Economic Recovery Plan

1.2.1 Since my report to Full Council in early October, the UK economy has continued to struggle with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Economic growth in September was weak and unemployment has risen to 4.8% (14.6% amongst 16 to 24 year olds). The second national lockdown in England and subsequent tiered arrangement has meant closure and restrictions for many businesses. The West Midlands saw a return to decline in business activity in October, following a positive trend over the summer.

1.2.2 Despite the challenges, Solihull continues to perform well for inward investment, recording over 20 investments (450 jobs) in the year to date, including six Foreign Direct Investments. These include investments in sectors important to the local and regional economy including aerospace (e.g. Collins Aerospace and STS Aviation Services), high value manufacturing (e.g. Minebea) and construction (e.g. Colas). We continue to actively promote the investment opportunities through events such as the recent Midlands Forum for Growth

1.2.3 The region continues to lobby Government for investment and I welcome many of the measures outlined in the recent Spending Review, which focuses on protecting jobs and responding to the current crisis. We will be working hard to see which of the major funding opportunities that were announced will help us to take forward our agenda for inclusive economic growth as more details become available.

1.2.4 Implementation of the new round of national support grants for businesses affected by the pandemic response restrictions, including the local discretionary element, is underway. We continue to support local businesses, including new enterprises, to identify and access relevant support programmes and space. For example, five local businesses have benefitted from the LEP's pilot 'Pivot and Prosper' Grant programme and we have continued to work with businesses to take-up space at the Council's refurbished Woodside Industrial Estate in the north of the Borough, which is now 85% let, including to four businesses from North Solihull.

1.2.5 Work continues with our towns and local centres to support their recovery and the safe reopening of the high street, including recruitment of three dedicated business engagement and support officers and commissioning of a programme of information sessions, webinars, podcasts and 1-2-1 support for traders. This includes a focus on encouraging and supporting traders to market themselves via social media as part of a 'Support Local' media campaign which led up to 'Small Business Saturday' on 5th December.

- 1.2.6 The decision by Cabinet to approve £200,000 from the Council's Place-Making Fund to enable initiatives by the Council and centre stakeholders that are in line with the Council's towns and local centres recovery plan will provide an additional boost to our towns and local centres recovery plans. Furthermore, Cabinet will have considered the refreshed Shirley Economic Plan by the time this meeting is held, which if approved will lead to further investment from the GBSLEP and the Council to strengthen the town centre. Similarly, the refreshed Solihull Town Centre Master Plan, adopted by Cabinet, will provide a strengthened framework for investment and development in the Town Centre
- 1.2.7 We continue to undertake targeted engagement with local employers so that we can help them to address the issues affecting them where appropriate and identify opportunities that can be brought forward as part of local and regional recovery plans.
- 1.2.8 There has been a resumption of the activities of the Solihull Sustainability Visioning Group and the Solihull Tourism Forum, the former providing an important route to engaging local employers in the Borough's 'green recovery', and the latter to engaging visitor economy employers in measures at the regional and local level to supporting the recovery of the visitor economy, including capturing opportunities arising from major events including the Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022.
- 1.2.9 We are 'alive' to the particular challenges facing young people and school leavers at the moment and are working closely with schools to identify and support those school leavers most at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). The Employment & Skills Team has been successful in securing approval of European Social Funding (ESF) (£850,000 over three years) for a new project offering support for young people 'at risk of NEET'.
- 1.2.10 The Council is planning to offer around 30 'Kickstart' placements for 16 to 24 year olds on Universal Credit who are at risk of long-term unemployment, as well as up to 12 placements with Solihull Community Housing. We are also encouraging local SMEs to register their interest in offering a placement with support available from the LEP and Birmingham City Council to set placements and ensure appropriate in work support and training. The Employment and Skills Team are also working with DWP on a proposal to set up a Youth Hub at the Solihull Employment & Recruitment Training Centre in Chelmsley Wood Town Centre via which young people in the Borough can access 'Kickstart' vacancies.
- 1.2.11 The Employment & Skills Team is involved in the region's Redundancy Taskforce, led by DWP and at the National Careers Service, which meets weekly to map out the offer for businesses and employees at risk, including post-redundancy employment support through Council-run projects. A simple offer for residents is being developed for launch in early December.
- 1.2.12 In summary, the Council continues to engage and support local businesses and residents to cope with the impacts of the pandemic and to work with partners locally and regionally to implement and bring forward interventions targeted at an inclusive and 'green' recovery.