

FULL COUNCIL

2ND FEBRUARY 2021

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, with particular reference to 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 December, Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have been tightened in response to a surge in infections, with a lockdown now in place across England until at least mid-February. Non-essential retail, hospitality and leisure businesses have been required to close across much of the country, including Solihull, since late December.

1.2.2 The UK's transition out of the EU completed on 31st December with a trade deal. However, there is much still to negotiate, potential for tariffs on some goods and risks around levels of preparedness for new customs arrangements and business uncertainty. SME support is available through the Growth Hub as part of a regional offer, and we continue to work with the LEP, Chamber and FSB to ensure that businesses are aware of the support that is available. I personally introduced the Solihull Chamber 'Brexit' webinar last month, which provided up to date intelligence and advice to businesses and which was well received.

1.2.3 The Council continues to implement the national support grants for businesses affected by the pandemic restrictions, including the local discretionary element, which has been used to support businesses not eligible under the main scheme. Since the Tier system was introduced in mid-October, as of 19th January, the Council had paid in the region of 3,755 grants from the national schemes and the discretionary scheme. Phase 2 of the Discretionary Business Grant scheme is now live with the deadline for applications being midday on 26th February. Work continues in assessing applications received for the national schemes. My thanks go to the officer team across the council that have been so efficient and prompt in supporting and delivering this service, bearing in mind the complexity and number of the schemes involved.

1.2.4 A programme of support for High Street traders across our local centres continues to be developed and delivered, using the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund. Traders can access virtual information sessions, webinars, podcasts and 1-2-1 support. Mental health and well-being support materials for employees and managers, secured via the Council's social value procurement framework, have been sent to over 300 businesses across the Borough. The 'Support Local' campaign continues but now focuses on businesses trading online and via delivery or 'Click and Collect'. Projects to support the recovery of all of our town and local centres, with the funding approved by Cabinet from the Council's Place-making Fund, and the LEP's funding for Shirley, continue to be developed at pace.

- 1.2.5 Wider engagement with businesses is also ongoing through senior officer and Member meetings with larger employers and through our local business forums, which are being held virtually. For example, the North Solihull Business Forum met in early December and received updates from Birmingham Airport Company and HS2 Ltd. and their main contractors.
- 1.2.6 Local businesses continue to receive up-to-date, targeted information, guidance and signposting to grants, support, networking and supplier engagement opportunities via the Solihull for Success e-newsletter and webpage. This includes signposting to the support and peer networking opportunities available via the LEP's Growth Hub.
- 1.2.7 Given the extremely difficult economic circumstances, Solihull continues to perform strongly for inward investment, with 22 investments recorded in the Borough since April. Six of these are Foreign Direct Investments. The latest investment is by high growth fashion company, Lounge, who have located their new UK HQ at 1 Blythe Gate, adding to their current distribution facility at Blythe Valley.
- 1.2.8 Following European Social Fund approvals, the Council is now able to deliver employment support to a wider range of unemployed and 'at risk' groups in younger and older age groups. Latest data shows that the vast majority (97%) of young people in Year 12 are now participating in appropriate employment or learning. Employment opportunities being created through the rollout of mass testing, vaccination and contact tracing are a focus for support.
- 1.2.9 Following the Chancellor's announcement of a new 'Levelling Up Fund' to support local infrastructure projects valued at up to £20m, the Combined Authority and LEPs are developing a submission of project proposals that align to regional priorities and that collectively will deliver the greatest economic, social and environmental impact. Once the guidance is released we will better understand the opportunities available and how we might maximise this funding for the borough.
- 1.2.10 Delivery of the Borough's Climate Change Prospectus continues to be progressed. This includes the development of the Low Carbon Energy Framework and the delivery of the Electric Vehicle Strategy, including a survey to understand how we can work with businesses to transition their workforce and fleet to electric vehicles.
- 1.2.11 In summary, the Council continues to engage and support local businesses and residents to cope with the impacts and opportunities of both the pandemic and Brexit and to work with partners locally and regionally to implement and bring forward interventions targeted at an inclusive and 'green' recovery.