

FULL COUNCIL

13TH APRIL 2021

REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR RESOURCES

1. COUNCIL UPDATE REGARDING RESOURCES

1.1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1.1 To advise Members of the decisions taken at the Resources decision making session held on 23rd February 2021.

1.2 Background

- 1.2.1 This report highlights some of the 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 is a list of decisions made.

1.3 23rd February 2021

- 1.3.1 At my February decision session, I considered two applications for discretionary rate relief from SOLO Life Opportunities for premises at 38 Walnut Close, 84 Maple Walk and West Midlands Fire Station, Streetsbrook Road and from Ordinary Magic for proposed premises at 86 High Street, Solihull. Due to the limited budget for rate relief, in assessing applications, the first consideration is whether an award of relief would have a significant impact on the organisation's finances. Whilst recognising their excellent work, I did not consider this to be the case for SOLO, so I did not make an award of rate relief. I awarded relief of 50% for one year to Ordinary Magic.
- 1.3.2 The Head of Income & Awards presented the third quarter debt monitoring report which set out debt collection levels to 31st December 2020. Due to the impact of Covid-19, many residents and businesses have encountered difficult financial circumstances. In response, the Council did not issue any payment reminder notices since the lockdown began for council tax, business rates, sundry income and overpaid housing benefit until quarter 2, 2020/21.
- 1.3.3 In July 2020 "soft reminders" were issued with the aim of reminding customers of their overdue instalments. Following this, if payment was not made our normal recovery cycle commenced. This took place between August and September 2020. Therefore customers received an additional reminder.
- 1.3.4 Since the start of the lockdown, only priority hearings have taken place in the courts which prevented liability order hearings for council tax and business rates taking place (which typically would have happened in quarter 1). In previous years we have held liability hearings fortnightly. The first hearing for any overdue council tax instalments from April 2020 (or for previous year's debts) took place in October 2020 and there was a further hearing in November 2020. The first business rate liability hearing took place after Quarter 3 on 6th January 2021.
- 1.3.5 Jacobs Enforcement Agents (who collect income on our behalf) did not undertake any visits to domestic or business premises from 23rd April 2020 until 24th August 2020 for previous year's debts and amounts owing for this financial year were passed to them in quarter 3 2020/21 (whereas normally this would happen in June).

- 1.3.6 Nationally in October 2020, the average collection rates for local authorities were down by 0.8% for Council Tax and 8% for business rates. At the end of December 2020, Solihull's overall Council Tax collection was 85.20%, which is behind by 0.75% compared to this time last year. As at the end of December 2020, Business Rates collection was 77.55% which is 4.94% behind this time last year. At the end of December 2020, Solihull had the highest council tax and business rate collection rates out of all the West Midlands Metropolitan Authorities.

1.4 Council Plan and Priorities

- 1.4.1 The essential maintenance works within the Council House will be completed by the end of this month and then our property officers will be working on the internal layout, furniture and ICT requirements to fit with the approved Smarter Ways of Working Strategy.
- 1.4.2 On 6th April 2021, the Resources & Delivering Value Scrutiny Board received the programme closure report for the implementation of the Liquid Logic ICT System in Adults and Children's Services. This programme has been four years in its planning and implementation. The system cost around £3.3 million, has been delivered within budget and looks after approximately two thirds of the Council's overall spending across Adults and Childrens. As part of the 6th April report, the Scrutiny Board was updated on the range of benefits that are being experienced through the use of this new system.

1.5 Issues of Interest

- 1.5.1 On 3rd March 2021, the Chancellor's budget announcement included a £50 million funding allocation towards the cost of the Multi-Storey Car Park as part of our overall Master Plan for UK Central. This excellent news is the result of many years of hard work by the Leader, Cabinet members and officers. The £50 million allocation needs to be matched by a local contribution of £45 million (which in total will then fund phase one of the car park). We will be taking a report to the June meeting of the West Midlands Combined Authority Board, to secure this local contribution.
- 1.5.2 As part of the overall support package to businesses, the government's Restart Grant scheme supports businesses in the non-essential retail, hospitality, leisure, personal care and accommodation sectors with a one-off grant, to reopen safely as the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. These grants are being administered by our Income & Awards Division and as with the previous grant funds, during this month we are issuing the grant payments as quickly as we can.
- 1.5.3 I am very pleased to be able to advise Council that Maria Demosthenous, our senior child care solicitor has been awarded the Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT) UK Children's Champion Award for 2020. The award is made in recognition of Maria's outstanding commitment to child victims of trafficking over the last 13 years. Maria has consistently challenged the criminalisation of child victims of trafficking, ensuring they are seen as victims not offenders. Maria has sought to raise awareness around the Modern Slavery Act section 45 statutory defence to ensure that trafficked children and young people in Solihull are not convicted for offences committed as a result of their exploitation - promoting the international principle of non-prosecution of trafficked children. Building on this, she has approached the judiciary to deliver awareness training. Maria consistently challenges decisions which are unlawful and inconsistent with national guidance. She is also a strong advocate for ensuring that the least restrictive and least intrusive options are considered in care and safety planning. She recognises that children and young people are active agents and experts in their own lives, and always ensures that they are able to have a voice and actively participate through the court process, by having access to good legal representation and a guardian.

- 1.5.4 For the 2019/20 Final Accounts Audit, 55% of local authorities did not meet the deadline of 30th November 2020 for receiving an external audit opinion on the accounts. For the year just ended (2020/21), the deadline would have reverted back to 31st July (the 30th November deadline was given because of COVID-19). On 9th March 2021, the Government laid regulations before Parliament that will amend the deadline to 30th September for the next two accounting years (2020/21 and 2021/22). This will help us to deal with a significant increase in accounting requirements due to the range of additional funding streams we have received to help with COVID-19, which are now approaching £120 million.

1.6 Future Decisions

- 1.6.1 At future Resources decision sessions, reports will be presented on Revenue and Capital Monitoring, Debt Monitoring, Applications for Discretionary Rate Relief, Welfare Reform, ICT Capital Projects and the implementation of the Corporate Landlord Model covering all of the Council's land and property assets.