

FULL COUNCIL

11TH OCTOBER 2022

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.

1.2 Economic Recovery & Growth

- 1.2.1 Since my last report, concerns around the impact of the energy crisis have been growing. The Prime Minister and her Chancellor have set out the Government's approach to mitigate the impact on households and businesses, and a new Growth Plan based on a comprehensive package of supply-side reforms and tax cuts.
- 1.2.2 UK unemployment has remained around pre-pandemic levels (3.8%) and Solihull's overall claimant rate has remained fairly low (3.3%), whilst recognising the area differences. However, real incomes have fallen, despite labour shortages which remain a significant challenge, particularly for sectors such as healthcare and distribution. Cost-of-living concerns are expected to perpetuate the challenges already facing high streets.
- 1.2.3 We have continued to engage and support local businesses, coordinating local business forums and signposting local businesses to support via our Solihull for Success communications channels. We have continued to work with our partners to deliver targeted support events for local businesses on areas including energy efficiency and sustainability, cybersecurity, procurement, tendering and social value.
- 1.2.4 We have used the opportunities created by the West Midlands Business and Tourism Programme to engage international audiences and potential investors with Solihull's offer. During the Commonwealth Games, this included supporting the Indian Trade Delegation visit to the JLR Experience, and positioning Solihull within the DIT-led UK House trade events.
- 1.2.5 We delivered a successful 'Visit Solihull' marketing campaign to promote Solihull during the Commonwealth Games, achieving over 66,000 visits to the 'Visit Solihull' website over the campaign period, and will continue to develop and promote our visitor offer.
- 1.2.6 We have made progress on our towns and local centres plans. As regards Solihull town centre we continue to work on plans for the integrated transport hub and we are about to commence public consultation on the range of proposals and opportunities embraced within our public realm improvement scheme. The success of our town centre is of enormous importance to our economy and local employment and over the coming years we have a number of projects which we will embrace as opportunities and circumstances present themselves.
- 1.2.7 Solihull town centre has continued to demonstrate greater resilience than other regional town centres with low levels of vacancies across the town. Touchwood is either occupied or under offer on all material vacancies. Similarly, excluding the former M&S store, there is only 1.4%

of vacant space within Mell Square, all of which is being held pending redevelopment. The former M&S, whilst unoccupied, is still under lease and produces income to the Council. We continue to see a high level of demand for retail space, particularly in the leisure and food and beverage category, where numerous new lettings are under offer. Year-on-year footfall in Touchwood is up 15% in August compared with a UK average of 7.5%.

- 1.2.8 Negotiations continue with the Police & Crime Commissioner in relation to the proposed police station in the town centre. Inevitably, these things will take time, because they are complex and there is much to discuss, but it is again heartening that the persistent campaign which we have waged over many years against closure of Solihull Police Station appears to be bearing fruit and could be another positive outcome from the purchase of Mell Square last year.
- 1.2.9 We continue to progress the redevelopment plans for Chelmsley Wood Town Centre and Kingshurst Village Centre. We also continue to deliver public realm enhancements and develop new visitor offers in Shirley and our other local centres, working with our local partners.
- 1.2.10 The Borough has seen further inward investments and expansions since my last report. In the construction sector, Stowe-based Buckingham Group Contracting is moving its West Midlands team to Shirley and Hayfield Homes are expanding from the town centre to Cranmore. Manufacturing firm Daikin are doubling their footprint on Birmingham Business Park. Eye care centre SpaMedica are expanding from Shirley to Blythe Valley Park.
- 1.2.11 We continue to support unemployed residents to move into employment and training. The Recruitment and Training Centre saw its busiest month yet in August, with 450 visitors to the Chelmsley Wood site. The Centre has also become a Digital Hub, with 15 young people signing up for ICT support in the first few weeks, which will help to brush up their digital employability skills. A new outreach centre at The Core opened in June, with 120 visitors in the first two months. We are really pleased to be holding our flagship event, the Solihull Apprenticeship Show returning after a break of three years. There will be two events this year, the first in south Solihull in October, and the second in February in north Solihull, ensuring the event is more accessible than ever.
- 1.2.12 Key milestones continue to be achieved to bring forward development opportunity at the UKC Hub. A hybrid planning application has been submitted seeking full consent for the first multi-storey car park to support the opening of HS2 and outline consent for a second car park if required. At the time of writing, we have received news of the government proposal to promote a number of Investment Zones, with reference being made to the HS2 Interchange at Arden Cross. Whilst the detail of this remains to be worked out, the acknowledgement of our efforts over many years to achieve recognition for our mission to ensure best use of this land is a significant achievement.
- 1.2.13 Work is nearing completion on a new economic strategy for the Borough aligned to our objectives for inclusive, green growth and net zero, including engagement with key stakeholders and our local and regional partners.
- 1.2.14 In summary, the Council continues to work with our partners to support our residents and businesses and to bring forward our plans for inclusive growth at the same time as reducing the Borough's carbon emissions, including by taking advantage of major investments including HS2 and the Commonwealth Games.