Overview and Scrutiny Committee
10 November 2026

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: Decarbonisation of Council buildings

INFORMATION NOTE OF THE: Director - Environment

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Executive Member - Environment

COUNCIL PRIORITY: Sustainability;

1. SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this Information note for Members of Overview & Scrutiny related to project to decarbonise Council buildings.

2. STEPS TO DATE

2.1 The aim of the Decarbonisation Phase 2 project is to decarbonise (move away from direct use of fossil fuels e.g. gas) our key council buildings: Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum, the Council Offices, and to complete the decarbonisation of North Herts Leisure Centre. The project is delivered through installation of low carbon heating measures, as well as building fabric improvements and solar panels at Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum. The project runs over three years, due for completion by end of March 2028.

2.2 The project is funded by a blend of grant funding and capital budget. In April 2025, North Herts Council was awarded £1,172,000 from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS), delivered by the government body Salix, to support the Decarbonisation Phase 2 project. Full Council approved a capital allocation to support the project of £2,190,636 as part of the budget 2025/26 in February 2025. An additional £104,400 budget was approved in September 2025 for the appointment of the external roles of quantity surveyor and principal designer, giving a total project budget of £3,467,036.

2.3 Delivering this project is an important action in our sustainability strategy and an essential step towards achieving our 2030 net zero target for the council's operational emissions. It aligns with the council's sustainability priority.

2.4 The primary benefit of the project is an initial net annual reduction of approximately 100 tonnes of carbon emissions (tCO2e). This results from a reduction of 175-190 tCO2e related to moving away from gas use and an increase of 84 tCO2e from additional electricity use. This is around 3% of the council's emissions in 2024/25. These emissions savings will increase as the UK electricity grid moves towards clean renewable energy, in line with the UK Government's goals.

2.5 A project board was set up at the beginning of the project to provide appropriate governance and oversight. It includes senior officers and the Executive Member for Environment and the Executive Member for Resources.

2.6 The original funding application and feasibility was developed in conjunction with Wilmott Dixon Construction Ltd, the main construction contractors who have delivered the leisure decarbonisation project on behalf of the council.

2.7 An updated feasibility study was undertaken during summer 2025. At a project board meeting in September 2025, and based on advice from Varsity Consulting, it was agreed that the most cost-effective delivery approach would be to work with a specialist mechanical and electrical contractor. This was due to the project being primarily mechanical and electrical with limited building interventions, making it less complex than the leisure decarbonisation project and much smaller in scale and budget. A further feasibility study during autumn 2025 led to the following decisions by project board in November 2025:

a. to appoint a mechanical and electrical designer (Couch Perry & Wilkes LLP (CPW)), architects and principal designer (Saunders Boston Architects Ltd), and quantity surveyor and project management support (Varsity Consulting Ltd) to develop designs for Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum and the learner pool at North Herts Leisure Centre.
b. to deliver interventions at the Council Offices through existing contractors, managed by Property Services.

2.8 During 2026, designs have been developed for Hitchin Town Hall and the learner pool, working with the facilities teams at each site to address practical concerns. A planning application was submitted for North Herts Leisure Centre in April 2026, with approval awarded on 15 July 2026. Planning was submitted in August 2026 for Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum, with approval awarded on 19 October 2026 (subject to conditions). Additional cooling works, including the replacement of the chiller for North Herts Museum and installation of air conditioning in certain rooms, were included in the project scope during the summer of 2026. This was to ensure the designs and works for both cooling and decarbonisation were aligned.

2.9 Works at the council offices have been undertaken between August and October 2026 to disconnect the last remaining gas boilers and install storage and panel heaters in the toilets and landing spaces. This also involved connecting the reception area and customers services centre to the wider air conditioning serving the building. Works at the council offices are due for completion by the end of October 2026.

2.10 In September 2026, a specialist Mechanical and Electrical contractor, Briggs & Forrester Special Projects Ltd (Briggs & Forrester), was appointed to oversee detailed designs (RIBA Stage 4) for Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum and the learner pool. The designs are anticipated to be completed in late November 2026, so that an update in costs can be provided, prior to a contract award decision by Cabinet in January 2027. Subject to approval, these works would be delivered by Briggs & Forrester.

3. INFORMATION TO NOTE

3.1 The following points address the issues raised by Overview & Scrutiny and bring in key lessons learnt from the leisure decarbonisation project.

3.2 Timelines and avoiding slippage

3.3 This project had a three-year planned timeline. This included a planning year (2025/26) where no grant funding could be used. The additional year allowed the council sufficient time to review the planned interventions and delivery route. In turn, this allowed the project board to make decisions as set in in 2.7, to ensure the delivery approach and measures achieve best value for the council.

3.4 The priority for the current financial year, as set out in 2.8, has been to manage some of the key project risks. A particular risk is obtaining planning permission and the project

team worked towards early submission of planning applications. This was achieved for North Herts Leisure Centre learner pool with planning permission being granted in July 2026. Submission of the planning application for Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum was delayed from April to August 2026, due to the need to address practical concerns from the facilities team and to consider feedback provided from the Senior Conservation Officer regarding the potential impact on the listed Hitchin Town Hall. As the planning submission addressed the concerns raised by the Senior Conservation Officer, it helped to mitigate this planning risk with permission awarded on 19 October 2026, subject to conditions.

3.5 Prior to submission of a planning application for North Herts Leisure Centre, the project team also engaged with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation on plans and ensured that updates to the council's license to alter the site include the phase 2 works, as well as the main leisure decarbonisation project. This early engagement helped to prevent delays. It should be noted however, that this project does not have the same legal complexities as the leisure decarbonisation project, such as permission for running cables through third party land.

3.6 A key part of scoring in the procurement of the contractors overseeing detailed designs, Briggs & Forrester, was that they could deliver the project to the required project milestones. These milestones are both internal and external and set out below:

a. Delivery of detailed designs and cost plan in time to inform recommendations on appointing contractor to deliver works for Cabinet meeting in January 2027. A decision taken in January allows the contractor sufficient time to order key equipment and spend the grant funding available for that year.
b. Subject to Cabinet decision, mobilising to be on site in February 2027 to complete works at Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum by June 2027. Completing works by June 2027 allows for the grant allocation in 26/27 to be spent and for additional cooling to be in place ahead of Summer 2027.
c. Completion of works at North Herts Leisure Centre learner pool in October to November 2027. This is partly timed to meet the Salix funding criteria as the existing gas boilers need to be 10 years old when they are removed and therefore cannot be removed before Summer 2027. The works are also being timed to avoid peak use of the learner pool in September 2027.

3.7 **Procurement of contractors**

3.8 The procurement approach for this project has sought to build on learning from the leisure decarbonisation project and ensure best value for the council.

3.9 As set out in 2.7, a decision was taken to work with a specialist mechanical and electrical contractor, rather than appoint a tier one construction contractor, due to the size of the project and its focus on specialist mechanical and electrical works. This route is likely to save money overall. It was also decided that a contractor would only be brought into the project after RIBA stage 3, so that the council can continue to have close oversight of development of designs.

3.10 Three specialist roles were appointed following this decision. Firstly, it was decided that a quantity surveyor should be in place from the start of the project. Varsity Consulting were appointed to fulfil this role and have experience working with the council on the leisure decarbonisation project. Varsity also have extensive experience of supporting delivery of public sector decarbonisation projects. Secondly, CPW were appointed as mechanical and electrical designers, due to their specialist knowledge and previous experience working with the council on the leisure project. Lastly, architects Saunders

Boston were appointed due to their experience working on listed buildings, leisure facilities and decarbonisation projects.

3.11 Briggs & Forrester were appointed through a mini competition of contractors on a specialist mechanical and electrical framework. They were selected due to their relevant experience and commitment to meeting the council's requirements. They also demonstrated good value compared to other contractors on the framework.

3.12 Briggs & Forrester will oversee the development of detailed designs and provide costs for delivery of the works, building on pricing information provided during the mini competition related to overheads, profit and risk. These costs will be reviewed by the quantity surveyors, Varsity Consulting, to inform the paper to be taken to Cabinet in January 2027. Subject to Cabinet approval, Briggs & Forrester could then be appointed to deliver the works for this project using the Pagabo Framework.

3.13 **Top project risks**

3.14 The top project risks are:

a. Obtaining planning permission. This is the council's top-rated risk. Planning approval for Hitchin Town Hall being awarded on 19 October 2026 has helped to mitigate this risk but consideration of the conditions provided is also required.

b. Risk of identifying asbestos. While any asbestos identified in the museum refurbishment project of 2013-15 was removed, there is a risk that asbestos could be identified if interventions are undertaken in areas not impacted by that project. To mitigate this risk, intrusive asbestos surveys will be carried out during the detailed designs development phase.

c. Risk of additional costs being identified and the council being responsible for further costs. The appointment of the quantity surveyors from the outset as well as regular cost reviews being built into the project programme aims to mitigate this risk. A detailed cost plan will be produced at the end of RIBA Stage 4, to give a contract cost for delivery.

d. Risk of project slippage leading to issues with meeting grant funding requirements due to delays or resource capacity. The decision to bring in Varsity Consulting early has helped to bring in additional project management support for the project. Delivering to key project milestones is also a requirement of the contractor appointed to oversee detailed designs in September 2026, as set out in 3.6.

e. Risk of additional costs and / or project delays related to Distribution Network Operator approvals if additional electrical capacity is required. Hitchin Town Hall is the building where an upgrade in electrical capacity could be needed with Briggs & Forrester currently validating previous assessments.

4. NEXT STEPS

4.1 As outlined in 3.6, the next key project milestone following completion of detailed designs is taking a report to Cabinet at its meeting on 19 January 2027 on appointment of the contractor to deliver the works. Subject to approval at that meeting, works will commence to align to the milestones listed in 3.6.

5. APPENDICES

5.1 None

6. CONTACT OFFICERS

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7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 None