

RECORD OF DECISION MADE UNDER DELEGATED AUTHORITY

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

Any interest to declare/ or conflict and any dispensation granted [*if applicable*]

SERVICE DIRECTORATE: *PLACE*

1. DECISION TAKEN

For the Authority to participate in a second round of the Joint Authority Solar Bulk Buy scheme, 'Solar Together'. The scheme aims to enable residents, community groups, faith groups, private businesses, and other organisations to purchase and have installed solar PV, battery storage and/or EV charging infrastructure at a reduced rate, due to multi-purchase discount resulting from large-scale participation. This round will follow the 2022 round of the scheme in which we participated.

2. DECISION TAKER

Sarah Kingsley, Service Director – Place

3. DATE DECISION TAKEN:

21st June 2023

4. REASON FOR DECISION

- 4.1 In keeping with energy consumption norms across the UK, Hertfordshire is a carbon-based economy, heavily reliant on fossil fuels. A significant portion of this consumption is residential energy usage. Decarbonisation of residential energy usage is key to dealing with the climate crisis and to enabling local authorities to meet the net zero targets they have set for their wider district areas. North Herts' net zero target for the district is 2040. Under the first round of the Hertfordshire Solar Together scheme, 2262 people from North Herts registered their interest in solar panels with 410 of these accepting the offer they received through the scheme. North Herts' registration and acceptance figures were the second highest in the county after St. Albans. 107 people from North Herts registered interest for battery storage only, and 18 accepted their offer. Further interest from residents in solar technology is demonstrable with over 500 residents across Hertfordshire already signed up to be informed about a second round of Solar Together.
- 4.2 Energy consumption from the private sector, from other public sector organisations, and from community groups will also need to be decarbonised in order for our 'net zero by 2040' target to be met, and for the government's target of all sectors of the economy reaching net zero by 2050 to be achieved. Interest in solar and group-buying schemes continues to be expressed by various partners including businesses and community groups, making clear the appetite for a second round of the Solar Together scheme.
- 4.2 With regards to this context, the HCCSP's (Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership) original Carbon Reduction Strategic Action Plan contained the following priority: 'To increase deployment of renewable energy in Hertfordshire', with an action 'To examine options to establish bulk purchasing schemes that facilitate deployment of renewable energy across domestic, commercial and industrial sectors'. To this effect, an initial round of the Solar

Together scheme was run in 2022. North Herts Council participated in this, as per the delegated decision of 23/11/2021.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 5.1 The alternative option would be not to participate in the scheme, though this would mean declining an opportunity to take steps towards the decarbonisation of the district.

6. CONSULTATION (INCLUDING THE EFFECT ON STAKEHOLDERS, PARTNERS AND THE PUBLIC)

- 6.1 Consultation has been carried out with the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure – Cllr Steve Jarvis – via email and at the Environment Briefing meeting.
- 6.2 Papers on the first round of the scheme (2022) were taken to Political Liaison Board (PLB) on the 2nd of November 2021. (PLB is comprised of North Herts Council's Leader, Cabinet Members, Managing Director, and Service Directors).
- 6.3 Papers on the first round of the scheme were taken to HCCSP for approval, following referral from the Hertfordshire Sustainability Officer Group (HSOG) October meeting. An evaluation of the first round and proposals for the second round were taken to the HCCSP meeting of June 2023. (HCCSP is comprised of elected members representing each of the Hertfordshire local authorities, plus the Local Enterprise Partnership)

7. FORWARD PLAN

- 7.1 This decision is not a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan as the Council has already identified this in our approved Climate Change Strategy and the participation will be a matter for residents, without any financial costs to the Council.

8. BACKGROUND/ RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 The proposed solar group buying scheme looks chiefly to target home-owners and private occupiers, offering them the opportunity to sign-up and pay for installation of solar panels, as well as energy storage and electric vehicle charging (EV) if they choose, at a discount to the market rate. The HCCSP project lead is also looking to enter discussion with the scheme operator about possible future options around fabric retrofit. This scheme can offer considerable savings and incentives to benefit at a faster rate compared with individuals purchasing and installing the technology themselves.
- 8.2 The main involvement for the authority is twofold:
- 1) Providing our branding for a letter campaign to homeowners/private occupiers within North Herts. (This will not involve the administrative responsibilities of sending the mailout, which will be completed by the scheme operator);
 - 2) Circulating information about the scheme to Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), any businesses that the Economic Development Officer may have contact with, relevant contacts of the Community Partnerships team (for example, faith groups, parish councils, and community halls), and any other relevant organisations or partners who may benefit from the scheme.
- 8.3 All those interested in participating will register interest via a website run by the scheme operator, iChoosr. The scheme operator, after vetting potential suppliers,

will go out to auction to select supplier(s) to complete the installations. iChoosr then contracts with the supplier(s) to complete the installation process directly with the homeowner/business/organisation. There is no compulsion for anyone who initially expressed interest in the scheme to proceed if they are unhappy with the price that the scheme operator has been able to secure at auction. The infrastructure at the home/business/organisation is paid for by the homeowner/private occupier/business/organisation.

- 8.4 The registration period for the scheme will open on 21st August 2023 and close on 27th October. The installation period is then estimated to run from December 2023 to June 2024. The installation timeframe was delayed for the 2022 round of the scheme due to issues around each customer securing the District Network Operator (DNO) approvals, driven by resource shortages at the DNO. However, there has been regular communications with participants to update them on the situation and there has been a very low level of complaints. This approach will also be taken with the second round, should any similar delays occur.
- 8.5 The cost of running the county-wide scheme is around £30,000. This is used to coordinate a targeted mailshot to residents who it is deemed are most likely to sign up to the scheme based on Experion Mosaic Profile data (provided by Herts County Council) and analysis by iChoosr. This will be a GDPR compliant process as only addresses rather than names of occupants are given to the scheme operator. This is in line with the first round of the scheme which ran in 2022, and no input is required from North Herts Council on this point.
- 8.6 The cost of the mailshot is being covered by Hemel Garden Communities (HGC) who have funding which is to be invested into sustainability initiatives as part of their development programme. This mirrors the arrangement for the 2022 round of the scheme. The costs will be recouped through the successful installation of solar panels through the scheme, and if desired, can be recycled to re-run the scheme in order to benefit more residents and organisations within the county. As such, participation in the scheme will require no financial contribution from North Herts Council.
- 8.7 For the 2022 round of the scheme, Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) managed the procurement and signed the contract with iChoosr, owing to HGC sitting within DBC. The contract that DBC signed with iChoosr, along with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that DBC signed with each participating local authority, is valid until 2026. DBC have agreed for the scheme to be repeated in 2023 and as such no new MOU or contract with iChoosr is necessary to enable the running of a second round of the scheme.
- 8.8 For the 2022 round, HGC met with the UK Energy Hub, who endorsed the use of iChoosr as the only local authority led solar bulk-buy back scheme in the UK. DBC's procurement team were satisfied that using iChoosr is considered best value as there are no comparable scheme/single source concessions, and this product supports and recognises Local Government procurement rules.
- 8.9 The involvement required from North Herts Council would be the contribution of our branding to the targeted mailshot to those within North Hertfordshire, and a small amount of officer time to promote the scheme to relevant partners, amplify the scheme on social media and our website, and signpost residents to further information on the website of the scheme operator. This contribution is to enable people to have trust in the legitimacy of the scheme and to ensure the widest possible benefit. Various pieces of copy and social media are provided by iChoosr, and we also have website copy and various pieces of guidance which we produced for the 2022 round which can be recycled for the 2023 round of the scheme. This will allow officer time to be kept to a minimum.

- 8.10 The risk to the Council is therefore a reputational one rather than a financial one, though the reputational risk is considered to be minor and mitigated prior to auction (commitment to proceed) as each provider is vetted for financial stability and their customer relations standards. Due diligence checks have also been made with councils who have already delivered or are currently delivering this scheme with iChoosr, including Suffolk County Council, and Cambridge County Council. It should also be noted that no significant issues arose during the 2022 round of the scheme.
- 8.11 Relevant papers on the project have been seen by the HCCSP, including our Executive Member for Environment and Leisure, at their June meeting, with each council asked to notify Dacorum Borough Council as to their intention to participate. A threshold of 100,000 eligible households is necessary for the scheme to run, meaning that DBC are looking for confirmation of participation from around six of the Hertfordshire local authorities.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Under terms of reference 14.6.9(a)(i) of the Constitution, the Service Director – Place, has delegated authority to manage, direct and control all resources allocated to the Directorate in accordance with the Council’s policies and procedures. As per 14.6.9(b)(x) they are to act as the Lead Officer for Climate change and green issues. There are no other direct legal implication to this report-other than those identified above.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. There are no specific revenue implications arising from this decision. The funding to deliver the scheme as explained above is via mail-outs and provided by HGC through their existing base budget; no funding is therefore required from other LA’s.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The primary risk to the Council is a reputational one in the event that the installation of the product does not provide the best customer experience, as we would be contributing our branding to the scheme. However, it is expected that this risk be minor and mitigated prior to auction (commitment to proceed) as each provider is vetted for financial stability and their customer relations standards. Due diligence checks with other councils who have worked with iChoosr on this scheme (Suffolk and Cambridge) have provided positive feedback, as has our experience of participating in the first round of the scheme.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2 There are no equalities implications identified as arising from this decision.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 Whilst there are contractual implications, as detailed above, DBC was considered best placed to manage the procurement and sign the contract with iChoosr and have considered any relevant social value implication as part of that process.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

14.1. An Environmental Impact Assessment has been undertaken. There are positive environmental implications arising from this decision as it supports the deployment of renewable energy within North Herts, and takes steps towards helping residents, businesses, and other organisations and groups to decarbonise their energy usage. This will bring us closer to meeting our net zero by 2040 target for the wider district.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 There are no human resources implications arising from this decision.

16. BACKGROUND PAPERS

16.1 Solar Together: Hertfordshire Solar Bulk Buy Scheme

17. APPENDICES

17.1 None.

NOTIFICATION DATE..... 23rd June 2023.....

Date sent to all Members, put on website and appears in MIS – Committee, Member & Scrutiny Services can confirm this with you,

Signature of Executive Member Consulted 

Date ...21st June 2023.....

Signature of Decision Taker 

Please Note: that *unless urgency provisions apply* EXECUTIVE decisions cannot be implemented until 5 clear working days have elapsed after the decision has been taken to allow for scrutiny call-in.

Call-in does not apply to NON-EXECUTIVE DECISIONS. This is a NON-EXECUTIVE DECISION.