NORWICH
City Council

Committee name: Cabinet

Committee date: 12/11/2025

Report title: **Pre-Scrutiny of Norwich City Hall Reimagined Cabinet Report**

Portfolio: Councillor Harper, Cabinet Member for Finance and Major Projects

Report from: Head of property and economic development

Wards: Mancroft

OPEN PUBLIC ITEM

KEY DECISION

Purpose

To provide an overview of the significant progress made in establishing a concept design and outline business case for City Hall. Also to approve the funding and appointment of a professional team to progress proposals on the main building through to listed building consent. As outlined in this report and the associated appendices, there is a significant opportunity to deliver a solution for the building and put the foundations in place for the reimagining of City Hall. This is supported by extensive consultation, market testing and benchmarking. The building is currently underutilised, requires investment to preserve its heritage and it is a liability currently costing a significant amount to run each year. However, it also has potential to deliver high quality office accommodation and generate a greater social and economic return to the City as well as generating income to support council services. There are significant risks with a do-nothing approach, this doesn't deliver a solution for the building to any new authority post local government re-organisation and could risk the building becoming redundant without a future viable use. Progressing the project to gain listed building consent will deliver a clear implementable plan for the building which delivers modern high quality office space whilst preserving and enhancing the buildings fabric. This will provide the best possibility for the building to continue in a future viable use and deliver wider enhanced benefits to residents and businesses in Norwich.

Recommendation:

To:

(1) Endorse the Concept Designs for City Hall as outlined in exempt appendix.
(2) To agree to progress to the next stage of development of proposals for the main building and submission of listed building consent.
(3) To agree to the use of up to £1m to progress to the next stage of development and submission of a listed building consent application, funded from the Commercial Property earmarked reserve, subject to

confirmation from the Chief Finance Officer (S151 officer) of the optimum way to fund these costs.

(4) To delegate the award of a contract for a professional team to provide the necessary support, capacity and capability needed to deliver a listed building consent to the Executive director of major projects in consultation with the cabinet member for finance and major projects.

Policy framework

The Council has five corporate priorities, which are:

- An open and modern Council.
- A prosperous Norwich.
- A fairer Norwich.
- A climate responsive Norwich.
- A future-proof Norwich.

The community led plan establishes specific goals for the city centre making it more accessible and connected to more residents, making it a place that meets the needs and aspirations of the whole city, with a growing population who will be living and working in zero-carbon homes and workspaces, and utilising pollution-free transport. The transformation of City Hall will play a significant role in the realisation of these objectives by enabling modern, inclusive, and accessible council services for all residents in Norwich, as well as supporting the future prosperity and sustainability of the city centre.

The Outline Business Case (OBC) sets out a clear and robust case for how the project contributes to the achievement of the objectives of the community led plan as well as other council policies and strategy. The proposed intervention to re-imagine City Hall has the potential to generate between £53m - £104m of economic benefits. These benefits originate from unlocking development, increasing economic activity, improving engagement as well as improved accessibility and connectivity and offering amenities for the community of Norwich. It therefore has substantial scope to achieve against objectives in the community led plan as well as other council strategies and policies such as the local plan and economic strategy.

Report details

1. Norwich City Hall is a Grade II* listed building which is a symbol of the city's heritage, culture and identity. Whilst it has long served as the Council's main office, the building is underutilised and requires significant investment to ensure it is fit for future use. This is a trend experienced in many council buildings around the country, and further accelerated by the Covid pandemic. In its current state, the building is inefficiently used, and its layout reinforces isolated working, creating barriers to adopting working practices that reflect the needs of a modern organisation. The building also doesn't fully realise its potential to be a driver for community pride and growth within the city.

2. In October 2024 cabinet considered a report on the future of City Hall and endorsed the continuation of the project and funding of £750k to establish a

concept design for the building along with a green book outline business case. Both the Outline Business Case and Concept Design Report have been delivered in time and to budget. They are attached to this report in the exempt appendix.

3. This table on the following page sets out the drivers for change identified within the Strategic Outline Case (SOC) in October 2024 and also how these have been translated into objectives, criteria and outputs in the Outline Business Case (OBC).

4. Initial concept designs have been created for both the refurbishment of City Hall and a proposed new extension at the rear of the building. These designs help explore different options and assess feasibility. They are informed by consultation with staff and external stakeholders, as well as a series of surveys and studies aimed at reducing project risks. Commercial viability and cost plans have also been developed. Further details are provided below.

5. The proposals are expected to deliver significant economic benefits. During construction, the project will generate local jobs and investment, boosting the local economy. Once complete, the refurbished City Hall and new development will increase the building's economic output and attract more people into the city centre, helping to support local businesses and enhance the city's vibrancy.

6. The estimated financial value of these benefits is around £53 million, rising to £104 million if the rear extension is included.

SOC Driver for Change	OBC Objective	OBC Criteria	OBC Key Findings / Outputs (Detailed Evidence)
City Hall is an important historic landmark, but its current use does not maximise potential or support the city's vision. The rear of the site is unattractive and underdeveloped.	Cherished Icon for the City	Complies with heritage and conservation requirements while enhancing architectural significance. Includes improvements to the wider public realm, connections to the surrounding area, and sustainability measures compatible with the building's listed status.	• Conservation statement of significance produced. • Heritage preservation ranked 3rd highest priority in public survey. • Design concept developed that delivers against objectives while preserving heritage value.
Public areas of the building are not welcoming, well defined, nor adequately accessible.	Welcoming in the Community	Public-facing and democratic functions should improve accessibility and create a welcoming, inclusive environment for citizens, visitors, and businesses.	• Public consultation: 83% rarely/never visit City Hall; 62% believe future access is important. • 75% rated current building experience as very poor or neutral. Concept designs improve accessibility, transform public areas, and create potential for future community space.
The building has high running costs, putting pressure on council finances.	Financial Stability	Must achieve value for money and become an affordable asset for the future (targeting £1m annual savings).	• Detailed cost plans produced. • Forecast £1m annual revenue benefit identified through running cost savings and income generation.

City Hall is outdated and inefficient as a workspace, with only 43% usable for staff.	New Ways of Working	Workspace should align with modern needs, sustainability ambitions, accessibility, and wellbeing values. It should be open, modern, and flexible.	• Concept designs improve usable area and flexibility. Staff engagement and benchmarking informed a base scenario based on current staff numbers. • Proposals consolidate council workspace, freeing 2,626 sqm for alternative uses, while enhancing civic/public meeting spaces. • Options allow scaling of council workspace in line with Local Government Reorganisation.
City Hall currently only serves the council and does not support wider economic or community engagement.	Unlocking Change	Contribute to regeneration, economic growth, and vibrancy through new uses and an open, engaging appearance.	• Public survey identified community and cultural events as top desired uses. • Public art exhibitions and café identified as features that would make City Hall more appealing. • Proposals include new ground floor public spaces for events/exhibitions and potential café/bar. Economic modelling indicates £53m potential wider benefit.
City Hall requires further progress on energy efficiency to align with council's environmental aspirations.	Future Flexibility	Capable of accommodating future governance, service delivery, and occupancy models, with spaces reconfigurable or shared across organisations.	• Detailed mechanical & electrical appraisal produced to inform improvements. • 81% of public survey respondents want City Hall to play a role in promoting sustainability. • Flexibility built into design proposals allows for a range of future uses and different levels of council space.
Anticipated Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and Devolution require City Hall to be primed for change.	Primed for Change	Must be adaptable to future political and organisational structures, ensuring resilience to changing functions.	• Options tested for scaling council workspace and shared occupancy with partners. • Flexible design ensures adaptability to different governance/service models. • City Hall positioned as a long-term civic asset, resilient to structural change.

City Hall Refurbishment Proposals

7. Consultation and analysis of how City Hall is currently used identified opportunities to improve efficiency, particularly by adopting more modern, flexible working practices. Based on current staffing levels, around 2,600m² of space can be repurposed for community use, public access, and commercial workspace. These new uses are designed to support public engagement and contribute to the council's wider economic development goals.

8. While the proposals are based on current staffing, future changes, such as Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), could affect how the building is used. The designs have been developed with flexibility in mind, allowing the building to adapt to different future scenarios while minimising risk.

9. The main proposals for City Hall comprise:
    a. **Zoning**: Spaces are organised by use, council workspaces in the southern wing, commercial lettable space in the northern wing, public areas on the ground floor, and civic spaces on the first floor. The design allows for flexibility between council and commercial uses.
    b. **Entrance & Access**: A new accessible entrance on St Peter's Street will improve access for all users, replacing the current reliance on Bethel Street. Lift upgrades are also planned.
    c. **Reception & Civic Living Room**: A new reception area will welcome all visitors. Behind it, a 'Civic Living Room' will provide a public space for meetings, events, talks, and exhibitions.
    d. **Customer Service Centre**: Located near the main entrance, with a dedicated arrival and waiting area.
    e. **Civic & Events Spaces**: The Civic Suite will be refurbished to improve council chambers and meeting rooms, which will also be available for public events and exhibitions.
    f. **Workspace Modernisation**: The building will be updated to support agile working, improve space efficiency, enhance wellbeing, and encourage collaboration.
    g. **North Lightwell**: Potential to enclose the lightwell to create flexible space for work, events, or exhibitions.
    h. **Toilets & Facilities**: Existing toilets will be expanded and upgraded to include superloos (fully enclosed, accessible units that support inclusivity and future needs), new lift facilities and welfare facilities such as cycle storage and showers.

10. Several technical studies support the concept designs and business case:
    a. A conservation statement assesses how changes may affect the Grade II* listed building.
    b. A mechanical, electrical, and public health report informs future upgrades.
    c. An updated Energy Performance Certificate and BREEAM pre-assessment guide environmental improvements and year-round comfort.

Rear of City Hall – New Extension

11. The rear of City Hall is identified for development in the Local Plan. The original 1930s design included four blocks around a central courtyard, but only two

were built due to WWII. The current car park presents an opportunity to realise the original vision by creating a landscaped public space that connects City Hall to St Peter's Street, Norwich Market, The Forum, and surrounding areas.

12. Various options have been explored for the new extension, including residential, office, and hotel uses. The outline business case found that office and hotel extensions offer the greatest economic benefits. The hotel extension option is recommended in the OBC due to its stronger market demand, better alignment with city centre goals, and potential to address market gaps.

Next Steps

13. The project has now successfully completed RIBA Stage 2 (Concept Design). A full Green Book Outline Business Case has been developed, setting out the strategic, economic, commercial, financial, and management rationale for the project. This provides a clear roadmap for delivering the scheme.

14. Based on the evidence gathered, the preferred option is a comprehensive refurbishment of City Hall. However, some uncertainties remain, particularly around the building's condition, which can only be resolved through more detailed investigations.

15. The next step is to move into RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design). This will help reduce risks and prepare the project for future investment. Key activities will include:

    a. Detailed Surveys: Carrying out in-depth investigations (e.g. structural, asbestos, mechanical and electrical) to fully understand the building's condition.
    b. Refining the Design: Developing the concept into a more detailed design, including final layouts and technical specifications.
    c. Updating the Cost Plan: Revising the budget based on survey results and detailed designs, reducing the need for large contingency allowances.
    d. Planning and Heritage Approvals: Preparing the necessary documents to apply for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent, which are essential for moving the project forward.

16. Completing this stage will turn the City Hall Reimagined project from a concept into a 'shovel-ready' scheme, ready to attract funding and delivery partners. At present, City Hall is a costly liability and not an attractive investment. Securing Listed Building Consent will provide the certainty needed to unlock future funding, especially through devolution or Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). This approach gives the project the best chance of success, regardless of how local government evolves.

17. The OBC also confirms that developing the land behind City Hall could bring major economic benefits. A hotel-led scheme is the preferred option, as it aligns with the council's goals for the city centre and addresses a shortage of high-quality hotel space.

18. However, the financial analysis shows that none of the options for the rear site (hotel, office, or residential) are currently viable without significant public sector

support. High construction costs and market conditions mean that private investment alone is unlikely to deliver the scheme.

19. This part of the project also comes with its own set of challenges, including:

    a. Complex negotiations with third parties
    b. Planning and heritage constraints
    c. The need to align with the upcoming City Centre Masterplan, which will explore opportunities on city centre sites more widely

20. Given these factors, the most sensible approach is to phase the project. The immediate priority should be to address the main City Hall building, which is in poor condition and inefficient and not progress further with the rear extension at this stage. Focusing on this first will tackle the most urgent issues and lay the groundwork for future development.

21. Further development of the business case is not proposed at this stage as the financial, commercial and economic cases will vary significantly depending on the outcome of LGR. However, the OBC provides a solid foundation which can easily be updated once the outcome and implications of LGR are known.

Local Government Re-Organisation – Why Act Now?

22. City Hall is a Grade II* listed civic building. It's currently underused, expensive to run, and in need of investment to protect its heritage. But it also has huge potential to provide high-quality office space, support community use, and generate income to fund council services.

23. Doing nothing carries serious risks:

    a. The building could become redundant under a new authority

    b. It cannot easily be adapted for other uses (like multi-tenant offices) without major investment

    c. If left unaddressed, it could be left redundant, damaging the city centre and reducing footfall

24. There are likely to be new funding opportunities linked to LGR and devolution. But to take advantage of them, the council needs to have 'shovel-ready' proposals, including planning and listed building consents.

25. The current proposals are highly flexible and can adapt to any future local government structure. For example:

    a. If a Greater Norwich Unitary is formed, City Hall could be fully occupied by council staff

    b. If a single Norfolk-wide authority is created, the building could either provide for council use or the proposals are flexible to allow greater levels of commercial tenant occupation.

26. The refurbished civic meeting rooms will be equipped with modern technology, making them suitable for a wide range of uses.

27. Whatever the outcome of LGR, having a clear, deliverable plan for City Hall ensures it remains a valuable asset, providing modern office space, preserving its historic character, and continuing to benefit residents and businesses in Norwich.

Consultation & Engagement

28. Ongoing engagement with key stakeholders has been central to the development of the City Hall project. The public was also invited to share their views through the council's online platform, Get Talking Norwich. Feedback strongly supported the project's core aims, making City Hall more welcoming, inclusive, and modern, while helping it play a bigger cultural and economic role in the city centre. Key survey highlights:
    a. 1,673 people took part in the consultation.
    b. 1,008 respondents said their top priority was better access to council services.
    c. 912 people wanted the building to host more community services.
    d. 860 respondents emphasised the importance of preserving City Hall's heritage.
    e. Despite its iconic status, over 80% said they rarely or never visit City Hall.
    f. 1,204 people supported hosting community events like workshops and fairs.
    g. Art (1,603) and cultural activities (1,165) such as exhibitions and performances were popular suggestions.
    h. 982 respondents said a café or restaurant would make them more likely to visit.

29. In addition to public feedback, staff focus groups have helped shape the concept proposals.

30. As the project moves forward, further consultation will take place. This will include sharing the concept designs and engaging with key stakeholders to gather feedback. The next phase aims to develop the design in more detail to support a Listed Building Consent application. This will cover key improvements such as opening up parts of the internal layout, installing a new lift core and enhancing important heritage features.

31. There will be more opportunities for public input during RIBA Stage 4 (Detailed Design). By that stage, the future direction LGR and the balance between council and commercial space should be clearer.

Ground Floor Accessibility Works

32. Alongside the wider project, work is being accelerated to improve accessibility on the ground floor. These improvements are already included in the council's capital programme and will include a new access ramp at the front of the building along with new accessible toilet facilities.

33. An application for these works is expected to be submitted in October, with the aim of appointing a contractor and starting construction in the new year.

Implications

Financial and resources

34. Any decision to reduce or increase resources or alternatively increase income must be made within the context of the council's stated priorities, as set out in its community-led plan "We are Norwich" and budget.

35. To progress to the next phase of the project (RIBA Stage 3 – Developed Design) £0.75m is required to appoint the professional team to take the project forward.

36. The funding will support an architect led professional team including structural, mechanical and electrical input, planning and heritage constultants, further detailed and intrusive site surveys along, quantity survey. In addition, a £100k contingency is allowed for and a small internal project team, which will manage the project and charge time back to it for which £150k is allowed for. This brings to total potential budget requirement to £1m.

37. To date, approximately £1 million has been spent on professional fees for the project. This includes:

    a. Strategic Brief – £15k (Oct 2023)

    b. Strategic Outline Business Case & Spatial Framework – £141k (Nov 2023 – Apr 2024)

    c. Accelerated Outcomes Scoping Work – £191k (Jun – Dec 2024)

    d. RIBA Stage 2 Concept Design – £387k (Feb – Jun 2025)

    e. Outline Business Case – £202k (Dec 2024 – Jun 2025)

    f. Site Surveys for RIBA Stage 2 – £62k (Mar – Jun 2025)

38. This level of investment is consistent with the scale and complexity of the project. Professional fees for projects of this nature typically range from 10-15% of total costs. For similar town hall refurbishments such as Waltham Forest, Westminster, Nottingham and Norfolk County Hall professional fees would equate to around £4–£11 million.

39. It is proposed the expenditure detailed above in paragraph 35 and 36 is funded from the Commercial Property earmarked reserve. Reserves represent funding set a side for a specific purpose and must be used to only fund one-off items of expenditure. Reserves cannot be used to fund recurring spend and can only be replenished if alternative funding is set a side in the future.

Legal

40. The procurement of the professional team will be undertaken in a manner compliant with council's contract procedures and that the award of the contract/s will be subject to the Procurement Act 2023.

Procurement Strategy

41. In order to maintain the proposed project timescales, we are seeking to delegate the award of contracts for the required professional team, to the Executive director of resources in consultation with the cabinet member for finance and major projects.

42. The project will be led by a lead architect, and it is anticipated that they will sub-contract key professional input such as mechanical, electrical, heritage, planning and structural advice. There will be some further direct appointments, these would be for site survey work, appointment of a quantity surveyor and commercial advice.

43. For the main architectural appointment, the following procurement options have been considered:

    1. **Establish competitively tendered contract:** Run a competitive procurement exercise looking for a single supplier to meet the council's requirements. Timescales for this approach do not meet the ambitions of the project timeline. In addition, this route presents further risks due to the change in procurement legislation which could delay any open tender during the next few months. **This option is not the recommended approach.**

    2. **Utilise an existing framework/s:** There are multiple frameworks available for these professional services. Frameworks can generate saving opportunities by leveraging economies of scale and will save time in our procurement process. Frameworks will be assessed for access to local authorities, favourable terms and conditions and supplier capability. Suppliers have already been through a competitive process to be accepted and therefore Contract Regulations will be met. Frameworks will also be assessed to confirm they will allow direct awards of long-term, stage-gated contracts.

       To enable us to meet the project timescales, it is recommended that direct awards are made following assessment of the capable suppliers who have the capacity to deliver to the project timescales. A full assessment of the procurement route and associated contract terms will be provided to the Executive Director at the point of award(s). **This option is the recommended approach.**

44. The value of the contract for the next stage, RIBA Stage 3 (developed design) is £0.75m. A further breakdown of costs is provided in the financial implications section.

Statutory considerations

Consideration	Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:
Equality and diversity	An Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the next phase. An accessibility audit has already been produced and has informed the concept proposals.
Reducing Inequality Target Areas (RITAs)	City Hall is located within the City Centre West MSOA but outside the Castle-Mancroft RITA.
Health, social and economic impact	None directly from this decision and given the early stage of the project. However, the outline business case outlines in detail the potential social and economic benefits which could stem from the project.
Crime and disorder	No material impact at this stage
Children and adults safeguarding	No material impact at this stage
Environmental impact	None directly from this decision and given the early stage of the project. However, a primary focus of the project will be to understand how the environmental efficiency of City Hall can be improved whilst preserving its historical significance. Studies undertaken at this stage of the project such as the mechanical and electrical study and conservation management plan have helped inform this and will be developed at the next stage.

Risk management

Risk	Controls required
Impact of proposals on Grade II* listed building and risk of objections to alternations.	A conservation statement of significance has been produced and the project has been developed and will continue to be developed with specialist heritage consultant support. There will also continue to be engagement with planners, Historic England and other heritage stakeholders to get support for the vision and need for change.
Cost escalation as project develops	Continue to derisk project and undertake further surveys including intrusive surveys to minimize risk.
Scheme does not achieve financial viability	Work to date shows a positive cost:benefit ratio. The next stage of development will help to refine costs and reduce uncertainty. It will also but the project on a good footing to secure external funding as the scheme will be ‘shovel ready’ with consent in place.

Risk	Controls required
Macroeconomic factors such as an economic downturn impacts rents/partner interest	Consideration of how to transfer risk though delivery model. Prudent assumptions. Monitor risk and explore phasing.
Macroeconomic factors such a material price inflation result in increased build costs	Appropriate contingency to be built into Councils cost modelling. Continual review of costs as design progresses (and accommodate changes and reduce impact). Transfer risk though appropriate procurement
Changes from agreed council spatial requirements	Robust design process. Gateway control process (as described in the Management Case) should be followed.
Rental value assumptions for City Hall not achievable	Market advice updated and tested as project progresses. Sensitivity check development appraisal. This will be reviewed post a decision on LGR and once the mix of council vs commercial space is understood.
City Hall Refurbishment procurement does not attract experienced contractors, or tight local labour market, that can deliver refurbishment work for a Grade II*-listed building	Early engagement through soft market testing.
Gaining employee buy-in to proposals	Involve City Hall employees & coordinate with HR to test proposals. Appoint design team with experience of similar projects.
Local Government Re-Orginasation	This is discussed in detail in the body of the report, progressing to the next stage is considered to be the best option in the light of LGR.

Other options considered

45. A range of options have been carefully reviewed, as outlined earlier in this report and in the accompanying Outline Business Case. The option to “do nothing” has been ruled out. It would not help achieve the council’s long-term goals for the city, support its transformation into a modern and efficient organisation, or ensure that City Hall remains a valuable and sustainable asset for the future.

46. The report also explores whether to move forward now with developing the rear extension of City Hall. This part of the project is being considered separately due to its complexity and the need for further planning and consultation.

Reasons for the decision/recommendation

47. Norwich City Hall is a landmark building with rich heritage and civic importance. The council has developed concept designs to refurbish the building and explore a new extension at the rear. These proposals aim to modernise City Hall, improve public access, support community use, and unlock economic potential.

48. Public consultation through *Get Talking Norwich* showed strong support for the project's goals. Over 1,600 people took part, with priorities including better access to services, more community events, and preserving the building's heritage. Despite its iconic status, most respondents rarely visit City Hall, highlighting the need for change.

49. The preferred option is a comprehensive refurbishment, with flexible design to accommodate future changes such as Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The next step is to progress to RIBA Stage 3, which includes detailed surveys, refined designs, and preparation for planning and listed building consent. This will make the project "shovel-ready" and able to secure funding quickly when opportunities arise.

50. Up to £1m is needed to fund this next phase. Around £1 million has already been invested, consistent with similar projects across the UK.

51. Securing listed building consent is a key milestone. It reduces risk, confirms what changes are acceptable, and ensures Norwich is ready to deliver improvements that reflect community priorities, protect heritage, and support the city's future.

Background papers:

Appendices: Exempt Appendix: Outline Business Case & RIBA Stage 2 Concept Design Report

Public Interest Test: This report contains commercially confidential information, the disclosure of which would be detrimental to the commercial interests of the Council. **NOT FOR PUBLICATION by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972**

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