

PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26th June 2025

OXFORDSHIRE EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Report by Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - i. Note the overview and achievements of Oxfordshire Employment Service, Oxfordshire's dedicated supported employment service for supporting people getting into sustainable work;
 - ii. Note Oxfordshire Employment's approach to delivering the Connect to Work programme with Enterprise Oxfordshire.

Executive Summary

2. Good quality work provides people with income, social interaction, a sense of fulfilment and purpose among many other benefits. Work supports people's wellbeing and aligns with the overarching strategy for delivering Adult Social Care in Oxfordshire, the Oxfordshire Way, which focuses on using strengths-based approaches and empowering people to be independent and live well in their community.
3. The strengths-based approach in adult social care is a person-centred model that focuses on individuals' abilities, resources, and aspirations rather than their deficits or limitations. It is about recognising and building upon the capabilities, relationships, and community assets that individuals and communities already possess. It also shifts the focus from "what's wrong" to "what's strong," aiming to empower people to live independently and meaningfully within their communities. In Oxfordshire, the strengths-based approach is embedded in the "Oxfordshire Way", our strategic vision for adult social care that prioritises prevention, independence, and community resilience. We work with people, their families and communities as partners and support them to take control of their lives and make informed decisions.
4. Oxfordshire Employment is Oxfordshire County Council's Supported Employment service, enabling people with long-term health needs or a disability to gain and sustain employment. Oxfordshire Employment also provides supported internship opportunities, which are highly successful in supporting young people to enter work.

5. In September 2024, Oxfordshire Employment was among the first 20 organisations to receive the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) Fidelity Award, rated 'Good,' having previously been one of the first holders of the local Authority Disability Employment Mark (Ladem).
6. Oxfordshire Employment has been chosen by the council to be the delivery partner for the Connect to Work Programme in Oxfordshire supporting disabled people, those with health conditions and people with complex barriers to employment. The programme will be delivered in collaboration with Enterprise Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire Employment Service

7. Supporting people into employment is important to their wellbeing, independence and inclusion. This approach aligns with our vision for adult social care in Oxfordshire, the [Oxfordshire Way](#).
8. Oxfordshire Employment has provided employment support for over 75 years. High quality supported employment is provided utilising the fidelity accredited 5-stage supported employment model recognised across Europe.
9. Oxfordshire Employment's dedicated employment advisors and employment support workers located across the county are skilled in job matching, disability awareness, and supporting employers with reasonable adjustments. They provide high quality and personalised support for people to develop their work skills, look for employment, provide support along the way, get a job and sustain their role.
10. Employment advisors are encouraged to work towards the British Association for Supported Employment's Practitioner Award, which is a prestigious recognition given to individuals who demonstrate excellence in delivering supported employment services. It celebrates practitioners who go above and beyond in helping people with disabilities or health conditions secure and sustain meaningful employment. We are proud that the Oxfordshire Employment has one of the highest ratios of qualified staff in the country.
11. Oxfordshire Employment operates County Print Finishers (CPF) in central Oxford, which is a nationally recognised Supported Business where employee support is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). CPF provides high quality print, digital post and fulfilment solutions for the Council as well as external customers, offering paid work placements to help develop work skills and experience to prepare people for external employment.
12. CPF was a founding member of the Supported Business Alliance, which is a national supported business network who meet regularly and share feedback directly with DWP. CPF have been involved since its creation and as a Steering Group member liaises directly with the DWP to define policy and funding models within the supported employment sector.

13. County Print Finishers has Disability Confidence leader status since 2017 and is a Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Visibility Confident accredited employer. This accreditation demonstrates that it is recognised as an inclusive employer for those who have any form of visual impairment.
14. County Print Finishers have also been working in partnership with White Brothers, which supply charity shops with new products, for eight years. In 2024/2025, County Print Finishers rebranded 472,650 items for the charity sector.

Supported Employment Model

15. The supported employment model supports individuals with significant disabilities into sustained employment through a structured, partnership-based approach. Oxfordshire Employment follows a five-stage model:
 1. **Customer Engagement** - understanding individual circumstances and barriers to work.
 2. **Vocational Profiling** – gathering key information to inform job matching.
 3. **Employer Engagement** – building relationships with employers to identify opportunities.
 4. **Job Matching** – analysing roles, identifying barriers, and recommending reasonable adjustments.
 5. **In-Work Support & Career Development** – providing tailored support during onboarding and progression, including Access to Work support where needed.
16. Oxfordshire Employment supports approximately 150 individuals annually, achieving more than 50% into paid employment and around 30% into outcomes other than paid employment (e.g. volunteering, further skills development)
17. Currently, Oxfordshire Employment is
 - providing paid supported employment (in CPF roles) for up to 23 people with disabilities or health conditions beyond reasonable workplace adjustments, enabling people furthest from traditional employment to remain economically active. CPF is proud to employ three staff members each with over 40 years local government service.
 - one of the first Local Authority employment teams to achieve the SEQF kitemark of quality assurance, having undertaken an extensive and robust accreditation process.
 - delivering a successful Supported Internship programme with the capacity to increase cohort size from 2026, consistently delivering outcomes exceeding national performance benchmarks (please see Supported Internship Programme section below for more details).

- One of 21 chosen local authorities currently delivering the DWP funded Connect to Work programme, a trailblazer for the national Connect to Work programme. A description of this programme is provided below.
- Developing the County Print Finishers' business to ensure both its status as a nationally leading Supported Business and its relevance to the council and the local economy. The social value and inclusive employment offer is widely recognised by customers, including the Royal Microscopical Society, Xerox and White Brothers Ltd, a leading supplier to the charity sector and holder of the Queens Award for Industry.

18. The work we do in Oxfordshire Employment and CPF makes a huge difference to people's lives, as can be seen from the two examples below:

J is in her 30's who has Aspergers Syndrome. She joined the employment scheme in December 2018 and was supported to harness and add to her employability skills. She subsequently started paid employment with CPF as a delivery driver and quality controller. J has thrived in this role and her close attention to detail made her a perfect fit for a role with CPF.

She takes great pride in the fact that her colleagues refer to her as 'Eagle-eyed J' and 'Hawkeye'. J has gradually increased her working hours over time and now works full-time five days a week.

J has said *'if I could sum up CPF in one word it would be 'opportunities'. Working at CPF means that disabilities of various forms are no barrier. Since I first started at CPF my self-confidence, mental health and ability to make friends and good colleagues have all improved'.*

T had not been able to sustain work for 10 years due to multiple physical health challenges which also negatively impacted his mental health. He has been involved with Oxfordshire Employment since 2019 and is now a fully employed member of staff who works full-time.

T says *'being employed at CPF has helped me recover my confidence and given me a renewed sense of purpose. At work it's so nice to be alongside people who care about me. It's given me a chance to smile more. I used to get moody a lot, but I'm not as bad as I was. I feel calmer in my body, I now know I will be fine. Everybody works as a team and I've never worked in such an environment before. Everyone here – my work colleagues and my managers – everyone helps you. I was made to feel welcome in the first week and that's not stopped. I don't feel like I'm a burden. I am well supported and enjoy the work. I like to help with everything, I don't like to sit around doing nothing. I didn't think this would ever be possible to be in a job where my health issues don't hold me back. The work means a lot more to me than just another paid job. It's no exaggeration to say that working here has transformed my life'.*

Supported Internship Programme

19. The supported internship model is a structured, work-based study programme designed for young people aged 16–24 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), working in collaboration with colleges in Oxfordshire and OCC Children's teams.
20. The Programme integrates real workplace experience with tailored learning and support, helping participants build employability skills, confidence, and independence. Delivered collaboratively by employers, education providers, and job coaches, the programme aims to transition interns into sustainable paid employment upon completion.
21. The Programme is delivered by weekly college-based learning tailored to individual needs and joint support provided by Oxfordshire Employment. The support framework includes
 - Assessing individual workplace needs
 - Matching interns to suitable placements with employment potential
 - Pre-employment preparation including travel training and employer engagement
 - Ongoing in-work coaching and support throughout the internship
 - Monitoring progress with colleges
 - Providing transition support into employment or further assistance.
22. In 2023–2024
 - 26 students enrolled on the programme in September 2023 and 23 completed the programme by July 2024.
 - 52% of completing interns received employment offers. This is higher than the national average of 36%. Projected employment outcomes for 2024-25 are 65%

Connect to Work Programme

23. Connect to Work (CtW) is a nationally prescribed and locally commissioned supported employment programme, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through grant funding. It is delivered by the Accountable Bodies that will determine how the support is delivered locally, in line with local priorities.
24. Oxfordshire County Council has been designated as one of 43 Accountable Bodies across England. The Council will design the local offer, shaping it around local services and priorities, to support people find and fulfil their potential to work. The Programme will primarily be focused on supporting people with a disability and specified disadvantaged groups such as disabled people, offender/ex-offenders, carers/ex-carers, homeless people, former members of HM Armed Forces or a partner of current or former Armed Forces personnel, people with a alcohol or drug dependency, care experienced young person/

care leavers (full eligibility can be found in the published guidance [Connect to Work: Grant Guidance for England](#)).

25. The Connect to Work programme also links with the Council's emerging local Get Britain Working Strategy, which will deliver a whole system approach to tackling the supply and demand challenges within local labour markets, covering market issues such as participation, progression, earnings and job quality in the labour market.
26. The programme will drive two Supported Employment models: Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). Over the five years of the programme (2025 - 2030), there is an indicative target of 2,000 participants in Oxfordshire, split between the two models (70% for IPS and 30% for and SEQF pathways).
27. Indicative cost of the programme in Oxfordshire is approx. £8.4 million based on the DWP's current demand modelling. The programme will be funded in arrears by the DWP subject to a delivery plan and grant funding agreement.

Developing Connect to Work in Oxfordshire

28. Oxfordshire Employment has been selected by the council to design and deliver the SEQF pathway.
29. An extensive mapping exercise has been conducted to identify potential providers of the IPS pathway and a number of organisations that could be interested in delivering local Connect to Work programmes identified.
30. Market engagement has taken place to explore opportunities with potential organisations, including with Enterprise Oxfordshire (a Teckal company¹, previously known as OxLEP).
31. An options appraisal has been conducted to inform the choice of provider for the IPS pathway and ensure that Oxfordshire residents gain the most value from the Connect to Work programme. The options appraisal has taken into account the following criteria:
 - The ability to meet the ambitious DWP timescales for the delivery of the programme and the programme outcomes;
 - The capability to deliver a quality, fidelity model for IPS in Oxfordshire;
 - Opportunities to tap into the existing experience and knowledge of Oxfordshire's labour market;

¹ A Teckal company is a type of organisation that allows a local authority to award contracts directly to a company it owns, without needing to go through a competitive procurement process. This is legally permitted under what's known as the Teckal exemption, now referred to as the vertical exemption under the Procurement Act 2023. To qualify for this exemption, the company must be wholly owned by the public authorities, the public authority must exercise control over the company similar to that which it exercises over its own departments, and at least 80% of the company's activities must be carried out for the controlling public authority or authorities.

- Ability to focus on supporting local people into employment effectively in conjunction with Council's ambitions and existing programmes to support inclusive employment in Oxfordshire;
 - Achieving ambitions which reflect the strategic vision of the Oxfordshire Way and other local strategy across health, employment and communities;
 - Deliver social value including keeping investment and jobs local as well as building capacity of local organisations and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSE).
32. The appraisal concluded that Enterprise Oxfordshire delivering the IPS component of the Connect to Work programme would create the most effective delivery of the programme in Oxfordshire.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

33. Oxfordshire Employment and the Connect to Work Programme will support the delivery of Council's corporate vision and priorities, in particular:
- Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire – there will be a measurable impact on numbers of individuals achieving supported employment through this work.
 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents – employment is considered a central part of health and wellbeing.
 - Support carers and the social care system – Connect to Work's eligible groups includes carers and care leavers.
 - Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential – Connect to Work's eligible groups includes young people from the age of 16-years of age.
 - Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy – the programme design will include co-production aspects to ensure the barriers to participation and job outcomes are removed.
 - Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit – there will be significant work carried out with the local business base to identify and provide job opportunities. The pathway will encourage social value.

Financial Implications

34. The Connect to Work programme is fully funded against a five-year operational period by DWP subject to a delivery plan and grant funding agreement. We do not expect any exceptional expenditure.
35. Based on DWP modelling, 2,000 people are expected to access the programme. DWP estimated the lifetime cost to be £4,200 per participant indicating a programme budget of circa £8 million. The Council has been awarded £100,000.00 from the total project budget to fund development activities.
36. It is recommended that the proposed contract length is 5-years with review periods after 1 year, 3 years and 5 years, which will give the opportunity to

review the service provided. It is also recommended that there be an option to extend for 2-years, should further government funding be provided as has been the case in other programmes. This will give the Council flexibility should short-term funding be allocated before any further support programmes come in.

Comments checked by:

Emma Percival, Assistant Finance Business Partner,
emma.percival@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

37. The legal implications of the Connect to Work programme are as detailed in the Cabinet Member report dated 29th April 2025 and as further detailed below:
38. The delivery of the programme will require entering into and complying with the DWP grant agreement conditions and guidance which will need legal input and support.

Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership Limited (OxLEP,) now trading as Enterprise Oxfordshire, is a limited company, wholly owned by the Council. It was formed as a 'Teckal' compliant company, in order that contracts for works, services and goods, awarded by the Council to it, are exempt from the requirement to carry out a competitive procurement exercise in accordance with regulation 12 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (PCR). The PCR has recently been replaced by the Procurement Act 2023, however, the 'Teckal' exemption (now vertical exemption) still exists under the new Act (contained within Schedule 2, paragraph 2 of the Act).

The contract for the IPS can be directly awarded by the Council to OxLEP, without competition (relying on the 'Teckal' exemption within the Procurement Act) provided that the Teckal conditions continue to be satisfied i.e. more than 80% of OxLEP's activities are carried out for or on behalf of the Council, only public authorities must hold shares in OxLEP, and the Council controls OxLEP (with no person other than the Council exerting a decisive influence on the activities of OxLEP).

It is important that the Council operates OxLEP in accordance with the appropriate controls (i.e. the Council does not allow it to operate with wider freedoms than those in its Articles and any Member Agreement, but instead it is managed and controlled accordingly) and continues to monitor compliance with the above conditions to ensure OxLEP continues to satisfy the 'Teckal' exemption.

Appropriate contractual documentation should be formalised with OxLEP in relation to the service provision.

Comments checked by:

Donna Creffield, Contracts Lawyer, donna.creffield@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

39. Oxfordshire Employment is part of Council's Adult Social Care Service and has been delivering successful employment support to people who need extra support to find and stay in employment for nearly 75 years. For Connect to Work, Oxfordshire Employment will collaborate with Enterprise Oxfordshire.
40. There is programme support available to Accountable Bodies for delivering the Connect to Work programme. The Programme will be delivered by existing teams. However, as the fidelity model stipulates precise caseload numbers, the Oxfordshire Employment team currently expects to recruit four further employment advisors. These posts will be fully funded and new team members will be contracted for the duration of the programme.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

41. Equity in experiences and outcomes is a key priority for Adult Social Care arising from our statutory duties under Care Act 2014 and CQC Assurance Framework and underpins measurable best practice
42. Employment is key to supporting people's independence and wellbeing. Oxfordshire Employment has a strong track record of supporting people well to achieve sustainable employment.

Risk Management

43. Adult Social Care Directorate Leadership Team has oversight of the risks and maintains a risk register and reports to Senior Leadership Team and Informal Cabinet through monthly updates.

Report by: Karen Fuller, Director of Adult Social Care

Contact Officer: Will Gardner, Team Manager, Oxfordshire Employment and County Print Finishers
Will.gardner@oxfordshire.gov.uk
07500227726

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