

PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17th September 2026

Update on the Council's Connect to Work Programme

Report by Corporate Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to

Consider the Council's Connect to Work programme in Oxfordshire, including how the programme will support eligible residents to access employment support, build effective links with employers, and deliver positive outcomes for people who face barriers to work. The Committee is also asked to support wider promotion of the scheme across Oxfordshire, helping to raise awareness among potential participants, referral partners and employers.

Executive Summary

2. Oxfordshire County Council is committed to delivering a high-quality and innovative Connect to Work programme offer for Oxfordshire residents. The Council is required by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to act as the Accountable Body for the Oxfordshire provision of Connect to Work, ensuring appropriate local oversight, governance and assurance for delivery of the programme. The programme is designed to empower eligible participants to access, move into and sustain meaningful employment, while supporting employers to create inclusive opportunities for people who face barriers to work.
3. This approach aligns with the principles of the Oxfordshire Way by promoting independence, strengths-based support, community connection and better outcomes for residents. This report summarises the actions taken by the Council and its partners to design, launch and deliver the programme, including the development of local delivery arrangements, referral pathways, employer engagement activity, governance and assurance processes.

Background

4. Connect to Work is a national supported employment programme funded by the DWP and delivered locally through upper-tier local authorities. In Oxfordshire, the programme has been designed to help residents who face significant barriers to work to access, move into and sustain paid employment. The programme will support up to 2,000 participants over its lifetime in Oxfordshire, with support tailored to individual circumstances and delivered

through evidence-based supported employment approaches. Eligible participants may include disabled people, people with health conditions and others who require additional, personalised employment support. It is a structured employment support offer that works with participants, referral partners and employers to create realistic routes into work and to sustain employment once secured.

5. Oxfordshire County Council has led the local design and implementation of Connect to Work in Oxfordshire, working with partners to put in place the delivery model, referral routes, eligibility arrangements, employer engagement approach, governance and assurance processes required for a safe and effective launch. The local model has been developed to reflect Oxfordshire's labour market, the needs of residents who are furthest from employment, and the Council's wider commitment to prevention, independence and inclusive communities through the Oxfordshire Way.
6. Implementation has included establishing programme management arrangements, developing pathways for referrals from health, social care, employment and community partners, and preparing delivery partners to provide consistent, high-quality support across the county. The programme is intended to strengthen the local employment support system by connecting specialist support with real employer opportunities and by helping employers to recruit and retain a more inclusive workforce.

The Oxfordshire Overview

7. Oxfordshire's Connect to Work programme has one of the smaller cohorts nationally, reflecting the county's comparatively high levels of overall economic activity and employment. The programme will nevertheless make a significant local contribution by supporting up to 2,000 eligible participants over its lifetime. It is being jointly delivered by Oxfordshire County Council and Enterprise Oxfordshire, combining the Council's experience in supported employment and public service delivery with Enterprise Oxfordshire's employer engagement, skills and economic development expertise.
8. The programme was designed by a local project team, with a strong focus on best practice and innovation. The team worked closely with stakeholders and people with lived experience to develop an innovative programme shaped around Oxfordshire's local needs.
9. The programme became fully live in January 2026 and has had a highly successful start in the county, performing strongly against the indicators set out in the table below, including programme starts, conversion from expressions of interest to employment starts, caseload levels, first earnings, lower and higher earnings outcomes, and in-work retention support earnings thresholds. This early performance provides strong assurance that the local delivery model, referral arrangements and partnership approach are enabling eligible residents to access support and progress towards employment outcomes.

10. The Oxfordshire model includes both recognised supported employment fidelity pathways: the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) and Individual Placement and Support (IPS). SEQF is a quality framework for supported employment services, helping providers follow a structured approach to understanding a person's goals, matching them to suitable work, supporting employers and providing help before and after someone starts a job. IPS is a more intensive employment support model that focuses on helping people move quickly towards paid work that matches their interests and providing continuing support so that the job can be sustained. The Council's own SEQF fidelity-accredited supported employment provider is delivering the SEQF pathway. The IPS pathway is being delivered, following a tender process, by The Palladium Group and Ways into Work. This mixed model allows the programme to draw on complementary expertise and to offer participants support that is appropriate to their needs, circumstances and employment goals.
11. The lower participant cohort has enabled Oxfordshire to focus on more targeted and innovative approaches to engagement and support. This includes the development of a successful young jobseeker pathway and a migrant and resettled jobseeker pathway, both designed to respond to identified local need and to improve access for groups who may not engage through more traditional employment support routes. The Council has also contracted locally with Style Acre to support a dedicated pathway for people with both learning disabilities and autism, strengthening the programme's ability to provide specialist, person-centred support.

Performance

12. Performance for Connect to Work is closely monitored by the DWP against key performance indicators. These indicators are used to track participant starts, first earnings and employment outcome performance, including lower and higher earnings outcomes.

Criteria	<i>Unredacted Performance levels in Annex 1</i>
Total participants joining programme	■
Conversion rate: expressions of interest to programme start	■
Total number of participants on caseload	■
Percentage against target of participants achieving first earnings (rolling 3 months)	■
Percentage against target of participants achieving a low earnings outcome (rolling 3 months)	■
Percentage against target of participants achieving a high-level earnings outcome (rolling 3 months)	■
Percentage against target for in work retention support participants reaching earnings threshold (rolling 3 months)	■

Notes: Figures are correct at 31st July 2026 and represent the preceding three months of programme delivery. Source: DWP performance data.

Outcome criteria are based on participants achieving first income, reaching the lower and higher income cumulative thresholds as reported by HMRC,

Data shown is embargoed by The Department for Work and Pensions and has been redacted. Data for this period is due to be published in December 2026

Ensuring equitable access to the scheme

13. The Council is committed to ensuring equitable access to Connect to Work across Oxfordshire and to meeting the DWP's requirements for participant entry into the scheme. All potential participants are required to complete an online expression of interest, which captures their own details and, where relevant, the details of any person or organisation supporting them to access the programme. This provides a consistent front door into the service and ensures that eligibility, consent and referral information can be recorded appropriately from the outset.
14. To support accessibility and recognise the wide range of participant needs, the programme does not rely solely on digital self-referral. The programme's customer relationship management system (CRM) provides data on participant location, protected characteristics and a wealth of other information, helping the Council understand who is accessing the programme and ensuring delivery responds to the challenge of rurality across Oxfordshire.
15. The programme's pop-up front door sessions and strategy of embedding access routes within local services also help to combat digital exclusion by enabling residents to seek support through accessible, trusted and familiar community settings. The programme has also been embedded as a referral pathway with a range of Oxfordshire community groups, enabling residents to seek support through trusted local organisations that can help them access employment support, sustain work or move closer to work.
16. Following receipt of an expression of interest, the participant will receive a welcome call to confirm their details, explain the next steps and identify any immediate access or support needs. They will then be triaged to the appropriate fidelity support pathway, ensuring they are matched to the model of supported employment best suited to their circumstances, needs and employment goals.
17. Programme delivery is supported by a stakeholder forum which sits alongside the Programme Delivery Team. The forum provides advice, challenge and co-production support, helping to ensure that the programme remains responsive to participant experience, community insight and local labour market need. This strengthens oversight of access routes and supports continuous improvement in how the scheme reaches and engages eligible residents.

18. The Council has developed operational pathways for groups who may be furthest from employment, including young people who need additional support to access, move into or sustain work. This reflects the Council's wider ambitions for young people by creating earlier, more accessible routes into employment support and by working with partners who are already trusted by young people, families and local communities. These pathways are based on the views of people with lived experience and local stakeholders, and use a range of approaches to improve access and engagement. This includes building contractual relationships with local specialist support providers, strengthening links with trusted community organisations, and exploring innovative technology that can help people understand the programme, express interest and access support in ways that work for them.
19. Connect to Work makes the programme accessible to participants from first contact by offering clear information, accessible formats, support to complete an expression of interest, telephone or face-to-face contact where needed, additional time for appointments, meetings in accessible or familiar venues, adapted communication methods and support to identify any immediate access needs.
20. The programme also supports employers to understand what reasonable adjustments are, when they may be needed, and how they can be applied in a practical and proportionate way. Employment specialists work with employers to identify barriers within recruitment, induction, job design, communication, working hours, supervision or workplace arrangements, and provide guidance on simple changes that can help participants start, retain and progress in work.
21. Examples may include adapting recruitment processes, offering working interviews or work trials, providing interview questions in advance, allowing extra time for tasks or training, adjusting start and finish times, reducing or sequencing duties during induction, providing written instructions or visual prompts, identifying a workplace buddy or mentor, agreeing regular check-ins, adapting communication methods, reviewing sensory or environmental factors, and making changes to equipment, workspace or supervision arrangements.
22. These adjustments help ensure that participants are not excluded by the way the programme is accessed or delivered, and that support can be tailored from first contact through to job start and in-work support. They also provide a practical way for employment specialists and employers to remove barriers, build confidence and sustain inclusive employment outcomes.
23. The programme also has a dedicated employer engagement lead and a clear process for engaging, briefing and socialising employers with Connect to Work. This includes explaining the aims of the programme, identifying inclusive employment opportunities, supporting employers to understand the benefits of supported employment, and building confidence in how reasonable adjustments and in-work support can help participants to sustain paid work. This employer-facing activity is central to ensuring that participant pathways

are connected to real labour market opportunities and that employers are active partners in delivering inclusive employment outcomes.

Ensuring sufficiency and scale of Connect to Work programme delivery

24. Connect to Work provision in Oxfordshire is delivered under a funding agreement with the DWP, based on an agreed bell curve of increasing funded capacity over the life of the programme. This means delivery is expected to scale in a planned and controlled way, rather than operate at full volume from the outset. The programme currently sits at around 60% of funded capacity and is expected to accept 65 new participants each month once full operating capacity is reached in early 2027.
25. The programme is delivered by a large team of skilled supported employment practitioners, with caseload sizes determined by the relevant fidelity requirements. These mandated caseload levels are an important feature of the delivery model because they protect the quality and intensity of support available to participants. Although the programme is currently fully recruited against its planned establishment, the Council has successfully bid for additional DWP funding in the current financial year to bring forward recruitment. This will allow more time to identify suitable candidates, complete onboarding and provide the upskilling required before additional capacity is needed.
26. The ability to operate at the required scale also depends on a steady flow of eligible participants whose needs and circumstances match the capacity available. A detailed marketing and communications plan is in place to ensure that participant demand is built progressively and aligned with the funded growth profile. The plan supports awareness raising with potential participants, referral partners, community organisations and employers, whilst avoiding demand being generated significantly ahead of available capacity.
27. Strong embedded links with local support organisations are central to sustaining participant interest and maintaining an appropriate referral flow. These relationships help ensure that Connect to Work is understood as a practical pathway for people who want to find or return to work, or sustain employment, and that referrals are generated through trusted local routes. This approach supports both sufficiency of delivery and the quality of participant engagement as the programme moves towards full capacity.

Broadening the Connect to Work Offer

28. The Council remains committed to broadening and strengthening the Connect to Work offer so that the programme can reach full operating capacity in early 2027. This will be achieved through a balanced approach that maintains an open to all front door for eligible residents, while also developing further participant pathways for those who may be furthest from employment and least likely to access support through traditional routes. The aim is to ensure

that people across all eligible groups have clear, accessible and trusted ways to understand the programme, express interest and join with confidence.

29. This will be achieved by using the open front door as a single and consistent route into Connect to Work, while actively connecting that route to wider local employment activity, including Get Oxfordshire Working. The Council will use its extensive employer and stakeholder engagement to raise awareness of the programme, identify inclusive vacancies and work trials, and build trusted referral routes through organisations already supporting residents in local communities. This will allow Connect to Work to remain accessible to all eligible residents, while also developing targeted pathways for groups who may need additional support, confidence or encouragement to engage and progress towards paid employment.
30. Where possible, and within the terms of the DWP grant funding available, the Council will continue to contract with local support organisations to secure additional participant support. By contracting with local organisations, the programme is able to bring in key local expertise, add assurance to delivery, and ensure that, wherever possible, Connect to Work invests in Oxfordshire organisations that are well placed to support residents, referral partners and communities. These arrangements will complement the core supported employment delivery model and strengthen the programme's ability to reach people who are eligible for Connect to Work but may require additional encouragement, preparation or specialist support to take part.

Governance

31. The Council has a strong programme governance structure in place to support the safe, effective and accountable delivery of Connect to Work in Oxfordshire. Core to programme leadership is the Programme Delivery Team, which meets weekly and provides the primary forum for programme oversight, coordination and executive operational decision making. The Programme Delivery Team reports through the Programme Manager to the Council's Head of Future Economy on a monthly basis, ensuring regular senior oversight of delivery, risks, performance and programme development.
32. The Programme Delivery Team is chaired by the Programme Manager and includes senior leads from Oxfordshire County Council and Enterprise Oxfordshire, fidelity programme leads, and representation from the supply chain. This composition ensures that operational decisions are informed by strategic oversight, delivery expertise, fidelity requirements and provider insight.
33. The Programme Delivery Team is supported by the Stakeholder Panel, which provides additional advice, challenge and partner insight. The programme also reports regularly to the DWP and to the Council's Head of Future Economy, ensuring that both grant-funding requirements and local strategic oversight are maintained.

34. The programme is currently undergoing the DWP Provider Assurance Audit, through which delivery and governance structures are being tested. This provides an additional layer of external assurance over the programme's arrangements and supports continued improvement as Connect to Work scales towards full operating capacity.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

35. The Council's policies are shaped by its corporate vision and priorities, with particular focus on tackling inequalities and ensuring that residents who face the greatest barriers are able to access the right support at the right time. Connect to Work directly supports this ambition by strengthening routes into employment for eligible residents who may be furthest from work, including disabled people, people with health conditions and others who require personalised support to move towards, enter or sustain paid employment.

Financial Implications

36. The Connect to Work programme will be subject to ongoing performance monitoring by DWP against agreed delivery and outcome measures. Where performance falls below expected standards, DWP will normally provide a period of enhanced monitoring, support and performance improvement activity.
37. Where poor performance is sustained and insufficient improvement is demonstrated, DWP may apply contractual remedies, including financial sanctions, the withholding or recovery of funding, and, in severe cases, termination of the funding agreement. Such action would normally follow a formal performance management process and opportunities for improvement.
38. The council will build in robust governance processes to reduce the risk of performance failure.
39. The DWP can cancel this programme at any time with variable notice which the council have mitigated against through our supply chain. It's expected that the DWP will defray any reasonable committed costs if the programme is cancelled.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

40. The Connect to Work programme is underpinned by Grant Guidance issued by the DWP, which provides detailed policy and delivery information to support

Accountable Bodies (Oxfordshire County Council) to develop local Connect to Work offers. As an Accountable Body, the authority is expected to work within the requirements, expectations and process set out in the Grant Guidance.

41. This report provides an update on the work being delivered under the Oxfordshire Connect to Work Programme.

Comments checked by:

Janice White, Principal Solicitor – ASC, SEND and Education

Staff Implications

42. There are no additional staffing implications arising from this report.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

43. 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. We take a person-centred approach to supporting people and any protected characteristics they have would be part of this framework.

Sustainability Implications

44. There are no sustainability implications in relation to this report.

Risk Management

45. 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.

NAME Karen Fuller, Corporate Director of Adult Social Care

Annex: Nil

Background papers: Nil

Contact Officer:

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