

Delegated Decision by Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care
29th April 2025

Connect to Work: Selection of Key Delivery Partner

Report by the Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) review the options considered against the criteria identified taking into account the requirements of the Connect to Work Guidance of Department of Work and Pensions, Oxfordshire's labour market and social value;
- b) approve the recommendation of Option 2 – Enterprise Oxfordshire as the provider of the Independent Placement Support pathway for Oxfordshire's Connect to Work programme; and
- c) delegate the pathway design and award of contracts decision to the Director of Adult Social Care, the latter in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and Head of Legal and Governance.

Executive Summary

1. 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. Oxfordshire County Council is designated as the Accountable Body Oxfordshire responsible for designing Oxfordshire's offer and delivering the programme for the initial five-year duration (2025 – 2030).
2. Connect to Work will be delivered through the provision of the two high-fidelity models of employment support, the Supported Employment 5 Stage Model and the Individual Placement Support Model (IPS). Indicative figures for Oxfordshire suggest that 2,000 participants will access the programme over four years. It is expected that 20-30% of participants will be supported through the 5 Stage Model and 70-80% through IPS provision.
3. The DWP funding for Oxfordshire is advised as £4200.00 per participant giving an indicative programme cost of circa £8.4 million based on the DWP's current demand modelling of 2000 people accessing the programme. The

programme is funded in arrears by the DWP subject to a delivery plan and grant funding agreement. Payments will reimburse costs defrayed by the council in delivering the programme. To support implementation, the Connect to Work Grant payment will be made monthly in arrears for planning and implementation activities during the implementation period, and quarterly in arrears for the Delivery Period.

4. This programme links with the Council's emerging local Get Britain Working Strategy which aim to develop a whole system approach to tackling the supply and demand side challenges within local labour markets, covering market issues such as participation, progression, earnings and job quality in the labour market. This report sets out the options that have been considered for the IPS pathway against a set of appraisal criteria. All options for delivery have been assessed against the requirements and the preferred option, working with Enterprise Oxfordshire to deliver the IPS Pathway emerged as the preferred option.

Background

5. Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) launched the Connect to Work programme in late 2024 as the first programme under the Government's new Get Britain Working Strategy. It is a work programme to help disabled people, those with health conditions and people with complex barriers to employment, to find sustainable work. It is a voluntary, high-fidelity Supported Employment programme, connecting work, health and skills support.
6. 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 help people find and fulfil their potential to work. Connect to Work will support those, primarily, currently outside the workforce and facing greater labour market disadvantages, to get into work and to stay in work.
7. The programme will drive two Supported Employment models: Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). The proposal has DLT and SLT approvals. Work is ongoing to ensure that the local model remains in line with fidelity assurance models and the programme is effectively co-produced.
8. 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](#) for details on eligibility).
9. Over the five years of the programme (2025 - 2030), there is an indicative target of 2,000 participants in Oxfordshire. This is split between the two models 70-75% for IPS and 25-30% for and SEQF pathways.

Planning the Delivery of the IPS Pathway in Oxfordshire

10. 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.
11. Market engagement conversations have taken place to explore opportunities with potential organisations, including with Enterprise Oxfordshire, (a Teckal company, previously known as OxLEP – brought under Council ownership through Cabinet Decision November 2024). 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 using the criteria identified.
12. The criteria have taken into account the following:
 - 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;
 - 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 the VCSE.
13. The Council has considered the criteria against which to appraise the options to identify the benefits and risks of each option for successful Connect to Work delivery.

Options appraisal

14. Three options have been considered and appraised against the criteria set out above.

Option 1

Do not deliver the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) pathway.

Option 2

Contract with Enterprise Oxfordshire (as a Teckal company) to deliver the Individual Placement and Support pathway.

Option 3

Take the Individual Placement and Support pathway to the open market and procure a provider.

	Option 1: Do nothing	Option 2: Contract with Enterprise Oxfordshire to deliver the IPS Pathway.	Option 3: Tender the IPS to procure a provider.
Delivering the Programme	The Council is required to deliver Connect to Work in Oxfordshire.	This would be a low-risk approach reputationally. It would deliver a programme to support local people into employment.	This would be a low-risk approach reputationally. It would deliver a programme to support local people into employment.
Criteria Met?	No	Yes	Yes
Deliver a quality, fidelity model for IPS.	This would not be achieved with this option. There would not be a programme of IPS offered.	DWP does not require a fidelity provider from the beginning of the programme. Enterprise Oxfordshire has committed to completing the fidelity self-assessment process in the implementation stage of the programme. The organisation has knowledge and expertise that can support the design and delivery of the IPS pathway.	There are a range of providers and prime contractors who operate a fidelity model and a number who do not. As this is not an immediate DWP criteria, this is not considered essential.
Criteria Met?	No	Yes	Yes
Contribute to achieving ambitions of our strategic vision of the Oxfordshire Way and other local strategic approaches	This would not be achieved with this option. There would be no opportunity to build strategic vision or join up activity across health, employment and communities.	Enterprise Oxfordshire, as a company owned and controlled by the Council, shares the ambitions of the Council, including those within the Oxfordshire Way. Working with Enterprise Oxfordshire to	It would be possible to identify a provider at a national level who could reflect the ambitions of the Oxfordshire Way but it would not necessarily be their primary purpose. National organisations operating in this

		deliver the IPS pathway would further join up local strategies.	space are likely to have their own ambitions and a mission created by their own corporate priorities. Ambitions around co-production would not be fully met in this option.
Criteria Met?	No	Yes	Partly
Deliver social value locally and build capacity of local organisations and the VCSE.	This option would not deliver against the Council's social value agenda. It would not bring forward local jobs or build capacity of the VCSE.	Enterprise Oxfordshire has excellent local links with local organisations. Through their 13+ years of delivering business support (through the DBT Growth Hub) and employment support programmes (No Limits, Apprenticeship delivery, Skills for Life Bootcamp, Careers Hub), Enterprise Oxfordshire has access to significant local assets and has worked with local organisations to build capacity in the county.	National primes are unlikely to have strong local networks and contacts with the business community unless they have delivered programmes locally over a long period of time. The risk of establishing these contacts at the beginning of the programme is high and would be detrimental to the delivery of the programme outcomes.
Criteria Met?	No	Yes	No
Ability to meet the DWP ambitious programme timelines.	This would not be achieved with this option as there would be no programme.	Enterprise Oxfordshire has indicated that they are able to work closely with the project team timetable for implementation and delivery. They have committed to early conversations on the overall delivery model and working	To competitively procure an organisation to deliver the IPS pathway for Oxfordshire would require a full commissioning process. This would significantly slow down the programme design and delay the start of the Connect to Work programme.

		with the Council to co-designing the offer.	
Criteria met?	No	Yes	No
Outcome	Not recommended	Recommended	Not recommended

Summary

Option 1

This is not the preferred option.

- The Council is required to deliver Connect to Work in Oxfordshire

Option 2

This is the preferred option.

- Enterprise Oxfordshire has already demonstrated a commitment to carrying out self-assessment of the fidelity 25-item scale.
- Their existing contacts with local businesses, VCSE and employment support providers is also an important factor in this appraisal.
- Enterprise Oxfordshire has indicated that they are committed to working with the Council to design the IPS pathway and support the development of the delivery plan for Council and DWP sign-off.
- As Enterprise Oxfordshire is a Local Authority trading company (also known as a Teckal company), it benefits from an exemption under which the parent local authority (i.e. Oxfordshire County Council) is allowed to enter into a contract without the need for a competitive tender process.

Option 3

This is not the preferred option.

- National organisations operating in this space are likely to have their own ambitions and a mission created by their own corporate priorities.
- Ambitions around co-production would not be fully met in this option.
- This would not have the desired outcome of building the capacity of local organisations and ensuring the model can achieve a local / hyper local outcome.
- The timetable for design and implementation would likely not be met given the time to commission an external provider.

Recommendation

15. It is recommended to agree progress of the Connect to Work Programme (design and procurement) in line with Option 2. In order to mitigate risk, the Council also recommends continuing design reviews with Enterprise Oxfordshire and building in contract milestones including:

- Completing a self-assessment of the fidelity 25-item scale in 2025-26 to identify areas for improvement.
- Completing the formal assessment of the fidelity 25-item scale in 2026-27.
- Achieving a 'good' rating within the first 3-years of the programme.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

16. Delivering a successful IPS Pathway in Oxfordshire aligns with following strategic priorities of Oxfordshire County Council:

- 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

17. The programme is fully funded against a five-year operational period by DWP subject to a delivery plan and grant funding agreement. The Council does not expect any exceptional expenditure.

18. 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.

19. 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:

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Legal Implications

20. The delivery of the Connect to Work Programme will require entering into and complying with the Department of Work & Pensions' grant agreement conditions and guidance which will need legal input and support.
21. 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).
22. 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).
23. 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.
24. Appropriate contractual documentation should be formalised with OxLEP in relation to the service provision.

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Staff Implications

25. The successful delivery of the Programme would require staffing support from OCC teams including Oxfordshire Employment, HESC (Commissioning Team), Legal, Finance and Procurement Teams. Supporting this programme is within the Council's ambitions and staff would be expected to support the implementation.
26. Additional specialist support may be needed to ensure a dedicated capacity to oversee implementation and escalate risks. The Council anticipates that this would include a Programme Manager, Project Manager and Consultant. These additional staffing requirements will be included in the detailed programme design and specification once the preferred option has been agreed. It is expected that these can be financed through the CtW programme budget and would be no cost to the Council.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

27. The Programme Delivery plan will align to the Council's corporate values of Equality and Integrity in all that we do. An Equality and Impact Assessment will be completed once the route is agreed. Oxfordshire County Council's contracting terms will require any contracting party to adhere to the relevant legislation and standards as a minimum with clear expectations as to culture, training and onward investment in EDI.

Sustainability Implications

28. The proposed IPS delivery does not directly create any sustainability benefits or issues. As part of the detailed development of the programme, the Council will consider if there are any climate benefits can be achieved (for instance, using public transport, reducing journeys etc). At the contract stage, the Council's standard terms and expectations for sustainability and environmental impact will be included.

Risk Management

29. The development plan will include a fully developed risk assessment and management plan. Key risks currently identified are:
- Programme timescales
 - Resource and capacity, including recruitment of suitably skilled practitioners for delivery
 - Identifying the ambitious numbers of participants required
 - The sustainability of Oxfordshire Employment should option 2 not be chosen as a delivery partner.
 - Duplication of provision.
 - Continuation of grant funding (review based)

Consultations

30. There is no requirement on the Council to consult in this instance. The development of the Connect to Work Programme locally in line with DWP Guidance is expected to benefit supporting people access employment locally.

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