

REPORT TO:	Executive Board
DATE:	15 th January 2026
REPORTING OFFICER:	Executive Director of Children's Services
PORTFOLIO:	Children, Young People and Families
SUBJECT:	Services to encourage young people to participate in education, employment and training
WARDS:	Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 Request for Waiver of Standing Orders:

A request for a waiver in compliance with Procurement Standing Order 1.14.4 iv of part 3.1 and 3.2 of Procurement Standing Orders is sought to allow the continuation of a contract with Career Connect to deliver, on behalf of the Council, the Provision of Services to Encourage, Enable and assist Young People to participate in Education, Employment and Training, for a period of four years from 1st April 2026 to 31st March 2030

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1) the report be noted; and
- 2) Approval is granted to the recommendation that the contract with Career Connect should be extended for a further four years without going through a Procurement process, in pursuance of Procurement Standing Order 1.14.4 (non-emergency procedures – exceeding a value threshold of £100,000), seeking to waive part 3.1 and 3.2 of Procurement Standing Orders, as advised by Procurement Team.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 Local authorities have a duty to make available to all young people aged 13-19 and to those between 20 and 25 with an Education, Health and Care Plan, support that will encourage, enable and assist them to participate in education or training. This is a duty under Section 68 of the Education and Skills Act 2008.
- 3.2 In addition, the Education and Skills Act 2008 placed two 'Raising the Participation Age' related duties on local authorities regarding 16- and 17-year-olds:
 - 3.2.1 Local authorities must promote the effective participation in education and training of 16- and 17-year-olds in their area with a view to

ensuring that those persons fulfil the duty to participate in education or training. A key element of this is identifying the young people in their area who are covered by the duty to participate and encouraging them to find a suitable education or training place.

- 3.2.2 Local authorities must make arrangements – i.e. maintain a tracking system - to identify 16- and 17-year-olds who are not participating in education or training. Putting in place robust arrangements to identify young people who are not engaged in education or training or who have left provision enables local authorities to offer support as soon as possible.
- 3.3 Since April 2014 the 16+ Education to Employment Team (previously known as the 14-19 Team) within Halton Borough Council have implemented the Halton Participation Strategy to meet the above duties. The revised approach to this area of work, brought about by the Halton Participation Strategy, brought a large element of the work in house and achieved financial and resource efficiencies in doing so.
- 3.4 The Halton Participation Strategy has also reduced the percentage of young people who are not in education, employment or training or whose activity is not known to the Council. In April 2014 the reported figure for Halton was 9.2%. The published annual average for Halton in 2024/25 is 6%.
- 3.5 An element within the Halton Participation Strategy is the commissioning of a specialist service to encourage, enable and assist young people to participation in education and training through the provision of information, advice and guidance by appropriately trained advisers.
- 3.6 The commissioning of a service to provide information, advice and guidance to young people has been carried out on three occasions since the Halton Participation Strategy was introduced, in 2014, 2018 and 2022. On all three occasions the contract was awarded to Career Connect as the most able to deliver to the scale and the requirements of the contract.
- 3.7 Since the initial contract in April 2014, and through all subsequent contracts, Career Connect have performed well against agreed outcomes and supported Halton to meet its statutory duties. The Career Connect team work well with the 16+ Education to Employment Team and demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to situations as they arise.
- 3.8 Because of the amount of time Career Connect have been in Halton the company's leadership team, team leaders and staff know the borough, and its individual and distinct wards, well. Staff have a good understanding of the provision, services and support available to young

people. Staff have good working relationships with teams in the Council and Post 16 providers in the area.

- 3.9 Career Connect is a large company holding contracts with eight local authorities in the Northwest, five justice service contracts, is the main provider of school commissioned careers services in the Liverpool City Region and deliverer of Advice and Guidance professional qualifications from Level 2 - Level 6. This brings a wealth of experience and good practice to the work they do in Halton.
- 3.10 Whilst there are other small companies delivering careers advice and guidance within the region, none are comparative in breadth and experience to Career Connect.
- 3.11 Career Connect were awarded Career provider of the year at the UK Career Development Awards 2025 in recognition of their experience and success.
- 3.12 The current contract with Career Connect came into effect from 1st April 2022 for a period of one year with an option to extend for a further three 12-month periods. The options to extend has been taken and the current contract will end on 31st March 2026.
- 3.13 The 16+ Education to Employment Team Leader has been working with the Council's Procurement team since June 2025 to discuss procuring a service from 1st April 2026. Due to changes to procurement regulations under the Procurement Act 2023 the size of the Career Connect contract falls below the Light Touch Regime threshold that requires a full procurement exercise. Procurement Regulations would allow for a contract to be awarded directly to Career Connect. This approach has been endorsed by the Council's Procurement team.
- 3.14 The annual contract amount is £100,000. The planned contract length is four years. This is in line with previous contract periods and to give stability to the staff team and work. There is no expected change to the statutory duties of the local authority within this period. The total contract value across the four years would be £400,000. This is well below the threshold of £552,950 excluding VAT that requires a full procurement exercise.
- 3.15 Given the value-added benefits gained from working with Career Connect, and the changes to procurement regulations, the Executive Director for Children's Services seeks Executive Board approval to continue the contract with Career Connect from April 2026 – March 2030.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Securing a service to encourage, enable and assist young people to participate in education is an essential element of the Council's work to meet its statutory duties.
- 4.2 The method of Procurement complies with both The Procurement Act 2023 and the Council's Procurement Standing Orders, as advised by the Council's Procurement team.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 To make most effective use of public funds the staffing resource from the Procurement team and 16+ Education to Employment Team can be best utilised by allowing Halton to continue the contract with Career Connect for a further four years.
- 5.2 The Council's Finance team have confirmed the budget is in place to award this contract.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 6.1 **Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence**
Supporting young people to participate in Post 16 education or training allows them to continue their journey to gain the skills and abilities needed for long term employment. Employment is a route to independence and choices as an adult.
- 6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**
The Halton Participation Strategy supports key priorities in encouraging young people to access learning or training that will lead to longer term, more sustainable employment options.
- 6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families**
Supporting young people to participate in Post 16 education or training and continue into employment is integral to ensuring they reach their full potential.
- 6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**
Social and economic factors show Halton young people to be at higher risk of NEET. These risk factors can be mitigated against with the right level of support to participate in Post 16 education or training.
- 6.5 **Working Towards a Greener Future**
None
- 6.6 **Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**

None

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 Opportunities associated with the proposed actions are:

7.1.1 Seamless transition into next contract and continued support during the 2025/26 academic year for young people.

7.1.2 Stability to current commissioned service staffing.

7.2 The risks associated with not taking the proposed actions are:

7.2.1 Impact on capacity for the Procurement Team and 16+ Education to Employment Team to manage a procurement exercise.

7.2.2 Unlikely to be able to procure a service by 1st April 2026.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

None

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

10.1 None under the meaning of the Act.