



OFFICER DECISION

DECEMBER 2024

REPORT TITLE:	DIRECT CONTRACT AWARD VIA YORKSHIRE PURCHASING ORGANISATION (YPO) FRAMEWORK WITH REED TALENT SOLUTIONS LTD.
REPORT OF:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF SEND AND INCLUSION

REPORT SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to make recommendations to the Director of Children, Family, and Education Services regarding the proposal to directly commission an agency to provide locum educational psychologists to support the Council's core psychology team to provide assessments and advices to children under the education, health, and care plan needs assessment process (EHCNA).

The recommendations support the delivery of the Wirral Plan by working together to promote fairness and opportunity for people and communities. This aligns with the vision to improve outcomes for children, reduce educational attainment inequalities, and raise the aspirations for all our children and young people.

The recommendations support the delivery of the following Wirral Council Plan themes:

Delivery Theme: Early Help for Children and Families

- children and young people have their needs met early
- children and young people stay safe and are protected from harm
- children and young people achieve their potential and are prepared for adulthood

Delivery Theme: Promoting Independence and Healthier Lives

- children and young people get the right care at the right time

This is a key decision.

The decision affects all wards in the Borough.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Director of Children Family and Education Services is recommended to approve that a direct award is made to Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. (Company number 11875450) via the YPO Framework, Managing Consultancy and Professional Services lot, to provide locum educational psychologists for children and young people undergoing the education, health,

and care plan needs assessment process within statutory timeframes. This will be for a 15-month contract at an estimated cost of £926,250.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 2.1 Educational Psychologists (EP) are critical in identifying special educational needs and disability (SEND) and providing a statutory contribution to Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA). When the Council carries out EHCNA they must obtain all the information set out in Regulation 6(1) of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 (the “SEN Regs”). This includes “psychological advice and information from an educational psychologist” (regulation 6(1)(d)). The advice provided must be given within six weeks of the date of the request.
- 2.2 There is a national shortage of educational psychologists. The Council currently has eight Educational Psychologist vacancies, and this, along with an increasing demand of requests, and an increase of complex needs in Wirral children, has led to a backlog of outstanding assessments and advices required to meet statutory requirements for children with SEND in the EHCNA process.
- 2.3 As of September 2024, the number of final Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) issued has increased steadily from 141 in 2019 to the latest full year reporting for 2023, to 368. This is an increase between 2019 and 2023 of over 260%. Educational Psychology Advices completed in 6 weeks have seen rates below 30% the past two full years with the trajectory reducing into 2024/25. The latest data from Q1 2024/25 shows 11.6% of advices within 6 weeks. Advices in Social care have remained well above 90% for the same time period and for health advices the levels have fluctuated between 100% compliance to lows of 24% for the six services offering this support.
- 2.4 There are specific actions and success measures identified in the Wirral Improvement Notice (May 2024) issued by the Care Quality Commission to strengthen the quality and timeliness of EHCNAs and annual reviews before the next Ofsted Local Area SEND inspection.
- 2.5 The Wirral SEND strategy sets out strategic priorities for Wirral’s children and young people. One of these priorities is to ‘Ensure early identification of special education needs and high-quality intervention particularly for children and young people exhibiting social, emotional, and mental health issues.’
- 2.6 For the financial year 24/25, Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. was commissioned to deliver 350 assessments across a 12 month period for the Council. By December 2024, Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. has overdelivered on this target and the existing budget has been exhausted. It is necessary to re-commission this service early in order to maximise the service deliverables.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The costings provided by this provider Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. have been benchmarked against other agencies are competitive against the current market for face-to-face and remote assessments. Additionally, the cost per assessment has not increased since the last financial year.
- 2.2 Schools currently are able to source their own Educational Psychologists for EHCNA on behalf of the Council. The Council will reimburse the payment to help support the backlog of advices/assessments once the advice received has been quality assured.
- 2.3 During the next 12 months there will be further consideration of the model of Educational Psychologists for Wirral, a proposed termination of school-commissioned assessments, and further procurement exercises.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 In September 2021, the commissioning team commissioned a call-off contract with Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. to address the backlog of advices for children under EHCP assessment. The contract with Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. was in place to assist the core team as the Principal Educational Psychologist could allocate individual children's cases to locums available on the Provider contract, which were completed within a timely manner (four weeks).
- 3.2 Wirral Borough Council currently has eight Educational Psychologist vacancies, and this, along with increasing demand of requests, and increase of complex needs in Wirral children, has led to a backlog of outstanding assessments and advices required to meet statutory requirements for children with SEND in the EHCP process.
- 3.3 There is evidence that without the continued use of locum Educational Psychologists, the backlog will continue to grow. The existing contract has reduced the backlog significantly.
- 3.4 The contract value for April 24 – March 25 was £498,750 and this was spent by December 2024 due to the call-off nature of the contract. Additional supply is required for 25-26 as the provider has worked at pace and delivered above the agreed contract objectives.
- 3.5 A review of the Educational Psychology Service is on-going to aim to reach an agreed position on how the Council will sustainably fund and deliver appropriate levels of Educational Psychologists capacity.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The annual contract value is at £641,250 which equates to 450 advices across the year at the cost of £1,425.00 per assessment. Whilst there are eight vacancies on the core team, and no increase in cost per assessment from the last fiscal year, there are no additional financial implications associated with this proposal.

- 4.2 There will be a reduction in schools-commissioned educational psychology assessments which will create additionality for this contract budget.
- 4.3 The total budget required to deliver this proposed contract is £926,250. This is based upon a 15-month contract (1st January 2025 – 31st March 2026). This will be reviewed during the life of the contract.
- 4.4 Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. to deliver 650 assessments throughout the contract at a cost of £1,425 per assessment (total cost £926,250). The below provides an updated breakdown of assessments monthly:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
40	50	55	50	50	55	45	20	20	55	55	30	20	50	55

- 4.5 The Contract will be managed by the Children’s Commissioning Team and Principal Educational Psychologist. Children’s Commissioning Team will hold monthly monitoring meetings with the provider to ensure progress and targets are being achieved. The Principal Educational Psychologist will lead on management, allocation, and quality assurance of all advices from the locums.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council’s Contract Procedure Rules set out how contracts are to be awarded by the Council in accordance with the Procurement Strategy requirements. The award will be underpinned by a formal contract which will be drawn up by the Council’s legal team.
- 5.2 The specific framework to which the provider is signed is: Managing Consultancy and Professional Services – 1141. The benefit of using this framework is that it offers value for money, all due diligence is carried out in advance of procuring the service, it provides a compliant route to market, and delivers on social value.
- 5.3 The Provider will deliver a service of locum educational psychologists and professionals that are fully vetted and ready to deliver the requirements of the contract. The professional services will be managed by the provider to ensure it is national, flexible and fluid.
- 5.4 The Council will be charged for services from the provider once complete on a case-by-case basis.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The Children’s Commissioning Team will establish monthly monitoring of the service for the duration of contract.
- 6.2 The Delivery Lead will have oversight of the contract and will be responsible for allocating work and quality assuring advices provided by the locums. Locums are provided by Reed Talent Solutions Ltd. who are responsible for providing a pool of locums to ensure the deliverables are achieved within statutory timeframes.
- 6.3 The provider will not require access to any Wirral systems and will use their own laptops.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 There is a national shortage of Educational Psychologists across the United Kingdom and the Council has been unable to recruit to the eight vacancies on the core team. This has created additional demand on the core staff who would be unable to manage the backlog of advice requests without additional support.
- 7.2 There is a risk that locums could work for other local authorities if work is not allocated in a timely manner by the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) which could affect performance. Risks will be managed by monthly monitoring meetings with the provider and Children's Commissioning Team to manage performance and ensure targets are being achieved.
- 7.3 Risks associated with not proceeding with this commission are:
- the backlog of outstanding advices would continue to increase and increase demand on core EP team
 - there would be increasing EHC Plans finalised outside of the 20-week statutory time frame
 - the actions in the Improvement Notice will not be achieved
 - children and young people may not achieve their potential and be prepared for adulthood
 - the aspirations of children and young people will not be raised
 - a potential increase of complaints from parents/carers
 - a reduced chance of breaking the cycle by not providing the support children and young people need
 - a reduced likelihood of early identification of special educational needs with the appropriate support and intervention enabling children and young people to attend local schools
 - reduce educational attainment inequalities
- 7.4 The procurement process is subject to scrutiny and at risk of legal challenge. Particular regard is given to contract procedure rules and relevant legislation at all stages of the process. The Managing Consultancy and Professional Services – 1141 framework provides a compliant route to market.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 Monitoring arrangements with the existing provider has highlighted gaps in the current provision and areas for improvement for the new service level agreement.
- 8.2 Children's commissioning team have previously undertaken a pre-market engagement exercise to assess the level of interest from potential providers and benchmarking costings to assess value for money.
- 8.6 Chair and Spokesperson of the Children and Young People's Committee have been briefed.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

9.2 Equality Impact Assessment can be found here:
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The content and/or recommendations contained within this report are expected to have no significant impact on emissions of greenhouse gases.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Social Value applies to this contract.

11.2 The Managing Consultancy and Professional Services – 1141 framework delivers on Social Value.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

- SEND Code of Practice 2014
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Wirral
- Improvement notice issued to Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council: May 2024
- <https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=5447>
- [Research on the Educational Psychologist Workforce: Research report](#)
- [1141 Managing Consultancy and Professional Services User Guide 261124.pdf](#)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date