

CHILDREN'S THERAPIES COMMISSION
Report of the Director of Education, Work and Skills

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to set out the arrangements for the procurement of contracts to fulfil our statutory responsibilities in relation to providing Speech, Language and Occupational Therapy services for children and young people of school age with additional needs.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The SEND Code of Practice (2015) provides statutory guidance on our duties, policies and procedures relating to Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014. This guidance document clarifies what the statutory functions are for Councils in terms of providing both speech and language and occupational therapy services for children and young people. It is clear that part of the duties of Councils is to provide specialist Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy support to children who need it within the educational offer. The Code of Practice also states that **joint commissioning** arrangements (NHS and Council) must cover the services for 0-25 year old children and young people with Special Educational Needs or disabilities, both with and without Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- 2.2 The Stockport SEND inspection (2019) highlighted that improvements were required to the arrangements for the joint commissioning of children's therapy services between the Council and Health partners, describing provision as being based on "a postcode lottery". Since that time a significant amount of joint work has been undertaken with partners to work through the commissioning processes and service offers going forwards.

3. JOINT COMMISSIONING ARRANGEMENTS IN 2025

- 3.1 The SEND Joint Commissioning Group now has oversight of the commissioning arrangements for the provision for children with SEND in Stockport including children's therapy services. This group reports directly into the SEND Board.
- 3.2 The existing contracts for the Council's education-related Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy services are currently delivered by three different providers. All these contracts are due to end on 31st August 2025 and as such, there is a requirement for the Council to go out to tender for both Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy services in the near future.
- 3.3 In Stockport, a joint review funded by NHS and the Council of Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy services was commissioned in 2022 and

based on the recommendations coming out of that review, work to move towards a “Balanced System®” approach to children’s therapy services has been developed. This is a nationally recognised system and has been led by external experts in the field. This approach has now been commissioned across the rest of GM and will be implemented as good practice across all 10 local authorities in the next few years. Using this approach, resources are allocated and targeted towards need and consider the child in the context of their whole environment, rather than approaching from a traditional medical view. The model also considers public health principles and the importance of early intervention and prevention. This work has been overseen by the SEND Board.

3.4 Over the course of the past year, a programme of work has been undertaken by Stockport’s multi stakeholder “Balanced System Implementation Group” to drive the delivery of the Balanced System® within children’s therapy services. Parent/carers, schools and special schools, provider and wider workforce colleagues have all been represented on this group. On the back of this work, a new specification has been drafted, which articulates Stockport’s requirements for Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy services and this is ready to be published as part of a procurement process.

4. EXISTING CONTRACT ARRANGEMENTS FOR COUNCIL COMMISSIONED SERVICES

4.1 The 2024-25 cost of both education related Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy services totals **£916,502** and comes from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) budget. The current contractual arrangements are complex and have developed over several years, as set out in the tables below:

COUNCIL COMMISSIONED SLT	PROVIDER	COST 24-25
Special school provision	Together Trust	£290,308
Lisburne School	Speechwise	£140,350
PRUs (Pupil Referral Units) MoatHouse, Pendlebury, Highfields, Oakgrove, Windlehurst	Together Trust and Speechwise	Included in main contract costs above
Resource Units	FT	Included in main contract costs above
TOTAL		£430,658

COUNCIL COMMISSIONED OT	PROVIDER	COST 24-25
*LOLER check contract in schools	FT	£60,600
OT service in special schools	Together Trust/ Dragon OT	£335,029
Lisburne School commission directly but SMBC funds	Mcr Occupational Therapy Services (MOTS)	£90,215 (SMBC) (+10,579 Lisburne)
TOTAL		£485,844

*The **Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998** (LOLER) are set of regulations created under the [Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974](#) and ensure the equipment we provide for children at school is safe.

4.2 The new arrangements will ideally seek to appoint one provider, to deliver both services. The purpose of bringing together these services into one contract has a number of benefits:

- a. Reduction in overhead costs
- b. Efficiency in contract management and commissioning
- c. One point of contact for children requiring different services
- d. More efficient use of resources
- e. Clarity around key messages and communication to schools, parents and service users
- f. Takes account of Balanced System® principles in terms of approaching a child in the context of their whole life, rather than as a medical intervention

4.3 New procurement regulations come into place on 24th February 2025, which make for more provisions around transparency, contract management and market engagement. This means that we need to account for this extra layer of work in the procurement process timeline, which is described in the table below:

Activity	Days	Cumulative	Start Date	End Date	Responsibility
PID to be signed off and received by Procurement	5	5	25/02/2024	25/02/2025	Stakeholder
PID approved and processed by Procurement	4	9	25/02/2025	28/02/2025	Procurement
Prepare draft specification, price schedule and quality	5	14	03/03/2024	07/03/2025	Stakeholder / Procurement

questions with weightings					
Contract Notice	0	14	10/03/2025	10/03/2025	Procurement
Contracts Finder	0	14	10/03/2025	10/03/2025	Procurement
Publish Tender	42	56	10/03/2025	21/04/2025	Stakeholder / Procurement
Scorings and clarifications	14	70	21/04/2025	05/05/2025	Stakeholder / Procurement
Moderation	0	70	05/05/2025	05/05/2025	Procurement
Award Report	14	84	06/05/2025	20/05/2025	Stakeholder / Procurement
Contract award notice followed by Standstill Period	10	94	21/05/2025	31/05/2025	Procurement
Final Award	1	95	02/06/2025	03/06/2025	Procurement
TUPE & Contract	30	125	03/06/2025	03/07/2025	Stakeholder
Mobilisation	10	135	04/07/2025	14/07/2025	Stakeholder
Contract Start Date	1	136	01/09/2025	N/A	Stakeholder

- 4.4 As there may be a new provider for the service, TUPE will apply and we have already requested TUPE information from the existing providers.
- 4.5 To allow for the new provider to effectively plan resources in anticipation of a September start date, the latest we can award the contract 31st May 2025.
- 4.6 The new contract will commence on 1st September 2025 to coincide with the new school year.
- 4.7 We are seeking a contract term of 4 years (+3 subject to annual review), which means the overall contract value will be in the region of £7,000,000. This allows for a 2.5% annual inflationary growth for the service, however does not account for any growth in demand. We are seeking a contract length of this time to ensure continuity of provision for the children and to ensure that the providers allocated

have sufficient time to build up a relationship with schools to continue the balanced system transformation work.

- 4.8 In terms of demand growth, based on the population information we have at present, the overall population demographic is that we are not expecting any significant shift in mainstream school places, housing development plans aside. However, growth in relation to SEND needs is not in line with general population growth: it is much higher. In terms of growth for children with specific speech and language needs, since 2018 there has been a 48.2% increase in number of school age children with that main need, with a growth of 90% in the EHCP cohort. This continues to rise, and there was an increase of 10% in 2024. As such, the Council will review this data at each contract annual review, and budget-set accordingly with finance colleagues to ensure the appropriate amount of funding is allocated to meet statutory duties.

5. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 This contract is financed by deployment of funds from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) high need block budget. The 2025/26 budget will be increased in line with general inflation (c.2.5%) and aligned to current cost provision. There is currently no direct cost savings attributable to the balanced system approach of one contract but cost prevention and achieving better outcomes will be the key markers moving forward. The one holistic service will avoid duplication, reduce overheads and is based on an established VFM approach.

6. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 This decision is Key Decision of the Cabinet due to it affecting two or more wards and because it is significant in terms of the budget to which the service relates.
- 6.2 The procurement process will be undertaken pursuant to the Procurement Act 2023 which comes into force on 24 February 2025. This legislation takes precedence over the council's current contract procedure rules which will be amended and updated with the support of STAR Procurement in June 2025. This cannot take place until then as it needs to take place at the same time as all other STAR member authorities.
- 6.3 The length of the contract is to be 4 years (plus an option for an additional 3 years, each further 12 month extension to be reviewed annually). Generally, the maximum length of a framework such as this is 4 years. However, this maximum term does not apply where the local authority can demonstrate that a longer term is required. With this proposed contract there is an option to extend after 4 years in increments of 12 months at a time, for up to a further three years, rather than being a contract for 7 years. The reasons for the length of the contract are set out above in section 4.

7. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

- 7.1 If a new provider is awarded the contract, TUPE will apply. We have already requested TUPE information from the incumbent providers and will continue to gain advice from colleagues in respect of legal processes.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.1 The starting point for this work was based on feedback from parents, carers and Ofsted regarding the postcode lottery of therapy services. An equality impact assessment has been undertaken in relation to this work, which is attached. In addition to this, parents/carers have been involved in the implementation group since its inception and have been involved in co-producing both the outcomes framework and the Balanced System specification.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 9.1 No environmental impacts have been identified.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 The Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and provide any comments on the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[SEND Code of Practice January 2015.pdf](#)

[The Balanced System \(R\)](#)

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Laura Mercer by email on laura.mercer@stockport.gov.uk