

Record of Officer's Decision

The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 and the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012

Date of Decision:	11 February 2026
Decision Maker (Officer):	Katie Wilkins, Assistant Director – People
Authority for Delegated Decision (Cabinet/Committee Decision or Scheme of Delegation – provide reference):	In accordance with Part 3, Schedule 3 of the Council's Constitution, paragraph 4.3(1), the Assistant Director – People has delegated authority to discharge executive functions within their service area (Part 3.38), following appropriate consultation as required under paragraph 4.3(4)(ii) (Part 3.39). The Section 151 Officer has been consulted, as the decision involves financial commitments.
Identify which Portfolio Holder(s)/Committee Chairman consulted?	Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Partnerships
Ward Member(s) consulted?	N/A.
Is it a Key Decision?	No
Is it subject to call-in?	No
Decision Made:	To approve an exemption from the Council's Procurement Procedure Rules and, subject to that exemption being granted, to authorise entering into an agreement with SDN Mesma Group (Strategic Development Network) for consultancy support to strengthen apprenticeship governance, quality and compliance. Agreement period: Academic year 2026/2027.

Reason for Decision (if a report was produced to support the Decision, refer to or attach it):	This agreement will strengthen apprenticeship governance and scrutiny, build confidence and capability across the Apprenticeship Board, maintain Ofsted readiness under the revised inspection framework, provide light-touch compliance assurance, and support future-proofing of provision in anticipation of policy and register changes. An exemption from the Council's Procurement Procedure Rules is sought because SDN Mesma Group is a specialist independent organisation with expertise that is not readily available elsewhere. A like-for-like alternative provider has not been identified, and therefore an exemption is the appropriate route to secure the specific support required.
Highlight any associated risks/finance/legal/equality considerations:	Financial: The total cost of the agreement is over £10,000. Under the Council's Procurement Procedure Rules, three written quotations would normally be required at this level of expenditure. However, no suitable alternative provider has been identified, and therefore an exemption is being sought. The cost can be met from existing budgets. The proposal represents value for money as SDN provides a specialist service not readily available elsewhere, offers continuity of support, and will deliver targeted outcomes aligned to Ofsted, DfE and DWP expectations. The cost reflects a focused piece of work that avoids wider consultancy expenditure and can be met from existing budgets. Legal: A direct award may be made subject to approval of the exemption. The exemption route ensures the decision is taken in accordance with the Council's governance requirements. Risks: Failure to engage SDN may reduce Career Track's ability to meet the expectations of the Department for Education (DfE), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Ofsted, potentially impacting the quality and compliance of apprenticeship provision. Equality: No adverse equality implications have been identified.

Details of Local Government Reorganisation and/or Devolution considerations	The proposed contract period will enable Career Track to maintain continuity of existing provision while retaining flexibility to respond to any requirements arising from Local Government Reorganisation. It ensures that the service can continue to operate effectively during potential structural changes and adapt as necessary.	
Details of any Alternative Options Considered and rejected (together with reasons):	No suitable alternative provider offering the required combination of apprenticeship governance, quality assurance and Ofsted-readiness expertise was identified. The Work Based Learning Manager was unable to locate a like-for-like further education support provider that meets DfE, DWP and Ofsted requirements. SDN Mesma Group has previously supported Career Track successfully, including in its applications to join the National Apprenticeship Provider Register. Based on this experience and the absence of an equivalent provider, SDN is considered the most suitable solution.	
Details of any declarations of interest (by Portfolio Holder/Committee Chairman who was consulted by the officer, which related to the decision) If relevant, a note of the dispensation granted by the Monitoring Officer:	N/A	
Reason Decision, or supporting Report, is not published: <i>Tick one or more of the specific exemptions,</i> <u>and</u> <i>Give more information in the final box with regards to why the exemption applies and outweighs the public interest test (which is in favour of disclosure).</i>	X	Not applicable – Decision [and report] to be published
		If Report is not to be published – tick one of the following boxes:
		The report supporting the Decision contains confidential information
		The Report supporting the Decision falls within an exemption pursuant to Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 Information:
		• Relates to an individual
		• Likely to reveal the identity of an individual
		• Relating to financial or business affairs of a person or organisation
		• Relates to a claim for legal professional privilege in legal proceedings

		• Reveals that the Council proposes to give under any enactment a notice under or by virtue of which requirements are imposed on a person; or to make an order or direction under any enactment
		• Relating to any action taken or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime
	<u>And</u> is exempt if and so long, as in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information Reasons:	

Officers

Signed: K Wilkins

Title: Assistant Director – People

Date: 11 February 2026

Signed: R Barrett

Title: Corporate Director, Finance & IT, S151 Officer

Date: 11 February 2026

Signed: M Stephenson

Title: Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for

Finance and Governance

Date: 11 February 2026