

Report Title: Re-procurement of the Kooth Young People's Online Mental Health Support Service

Date of meeting:	3 October 2024
Report to:	Cabinet
Report of:	Director of Public Health
Portfolio:	Cabinet Member - Public Health and Wellbeing
Wards affected:	All Wards
Included in Forward Plan:	Yes
Is this a key decision:	Yes
Exempt/confidential report:	No

Summary:

This paper seeks Cabinet approval for the following:

1. To undertake a Direct Award under Process C of the Health Care Services Provider Selection Regime (PSR) 2023*, including publication of a notice to make an award to the existing provider (as set out in schedule 3 PSR 2023) to Kooth PLC from the 1st January 2025 for a core period of 3.25 years with the option to extend for a further 2x 1-year periods, subject to satisfactory on-going performance and value for money being evidenced.
2. To give delegated authority for the Director of Public Health in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing to authorise and execute extensions to the contract within the terms of the Direct Award.

*Direct Award Process C is a method under the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023 that allows a relevant authority to award a new contract to an existing provider when an existing contract is due to expire, and the existing provider is satisfying the existing contract and likely to satisfy the new contract.

Recommendation(s):

This paper provides the recommendation for Cabinet to:

1. Authorise the Director of Public Health in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing to make a Direct Award to Kooth PLC from 1st January 2025 for the provision of low-level online mental health support under Process C of the Provider Selection Regime. Advice has been taken from Procurement colleagues and a procurement evaluation exercise has been carried out and concluded to ensure Kooth is demonstrating satisfactory on-going performance and value for money.
2. Authorise the Director of Public Health in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing to exercise any extension options within the terms of the Direct Award.

1. The Rationale and Evidence for the Recommendations

Background

The impacts of COVID-19 on children, young people and families were significant and long lasting. Following the pandemic, themes emerged, which included a decline in emotional health and wellbeing, widening inequalities and increased demand on specialist services, which have since been further exacerbated by the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

Kooth is an online chat-based mental health support service for young people ages 10-25. They offer free and anonymous support through 1 to 1 chats with mental health professionals and via forums which are monitored by an admin from the Kooth service. The Kooth service is accredited by the British Association for Counselling and Psychology (BACP). Kooth is accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year and provides access to chat sessions with counsellors and qualified emotional wellbeing practitioners. All chat sessions are text-based conversations that take place on the Kooth website, and last up to an hour. Chat is available from 12pm – 10pm Monday through Friday, and 6pm – 10pm Saturday and Sunday, providing an 'out of hours' service. Kooth is accessible from any device that connects to Wi-Fi, allowing young people to seek support at a time and location that is suitable for them.

It is important to have a universal offer in Sefton for our young people to access low level support to help keep them well. Young people have helped shape how they access services and support, with more preferring less direct methods of communication, preferring text-based communication. This has never been more pertinent than in the most recent few weeks in the wake of the tragedy in Southport.

Providing our young people with the means to help better manage their own wellbeing will likely prevent them from having mental ill health. Not having a service in place that can offer this would cause harm to our young people and would create a gap in the continuity of care we currently offer our children and young people.

Reasons for the Recommendation(s):

1. The current contracts will expire on 31st December 2024.
2. The existing provider, Kooth PLC, is satisfying the original contract and is likely to satisfy the proposed new contract meeting the selection criteria for Direct Award Process C.

3. Assurance of satisfactory performance is evidenced against the five key criteria for assessing provider eligibility under Direct Award Process C:

- Quality and innovation
- Value
- Integration, collaboration, and service sustainability.
- Improving Access, reducing health inequalities, and facilitating choice.
- Social Value

Having determined through written confirmation that Kooth PLC wishes to continue to provide services under the conditions outlined in the current service specification, officers assessed and evaluated the above key criteria using an agreed set of service specific quality and performance questions and Sefton Council's outline for meeting social value as set out in the PSR Process C guidance. We are now seeking authorisation for the Director of Public Health in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing to make a Direct Award to Kooth PLC.

Scores were compared and moderated by Procurement colleagues. All scores reached satisfactory or above outcomes with all five assessed areas achieving a pass score of 3 or above.

2. Financial Implications

The total annual budget for the Kooth service is £130,000 exclusive of VAT per annum. The cost per annum is fixed for three years and is inclusive of inflationary uplifts for this period. The price at point of extension to be negotiated with uplift considered by commissioners.

The service is funded through comprised of contributions from Sefton Council Public Health and Children's Services, and Cheshire and Merseyside ICB Sefton Place, with each partner contributing:

- £38,613.86 – Public Health contribution
- £48,910.89 – Children's Services contribution
- £42,475.25 – Cheshire and Merseyside ICB Sefton Place contribution

3. Legal Implications

The existing providers performance has been assessed against the five key criteria set out in the criteria for Direct Award Process C using performance reporting against annual work plans and a submitted social value statement.

Assessments have been individually scored and moderated as per Sefton Council Contract Procedure Rules and will be recorded on the PSR decision making record for publication and or audit purposes. This will enable the Council to decide whether it is satisfied that the existing provider is meeting the existing contract requirements and will likely satisfy the proposed new contract, as required by Regulation 9 of the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023.

4. Corporate Risk Implications

There are no corporate risks associated with the recommendations within the report.

A decision to reject the recommendations within the report opens the Council to reputational risk as this would create a gap in the continuity of care that we currently offer our children and young people in the wake of the tragic incident in Southport.

5 Staffing HR Implications

The cost of this service will be met within the core public health budget. There are no risks associated to Financial, IT, Staffing and Assets

6 Conclusion

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

1. Direct Award Process A – while the service requires highly specialist trained staff and digital infrastructure which limits the number of providers able to provide the required services, we do not consider the existing provider to be the only capable provider and the Council is not concluding a framework agreement. Therefore, Direct Award Process A is not appropriate.
2. Direct Award Process B – it is not a contracting arrangement where people have a choice of providers nor where the number of providers are restricted by the authority. Therefore, Direct Award Process B is not appropriate.
3. Most suitable provider process – where the relevant authority is able to identify the most suitable provider this option may be considered without running a complete process. This process is not required as the existing provider meets the criteria for Direct award process C. Therefore, most suitable provider process is not appropriate.
4. Competitive Process – The local authority is satisfied with the service that Kooth PLC provides and does not wish to undertake a competitive tender commissioning exercise when this will likely result in very little interest and potentially result in service instability.
5. To not re-commission the Kooth service – this option was rejected as it opens the Council to reputational risk and would create a gap in the continuity of care that we currently offer our children and young people.

In line with the PSR criteria for Direct Award Process C, services are not changing considerably. Any changes to the financial value of the contract will reflect annual inflationary uplifts and will remain within 25% of the overall contract value.

We therefore conclude that the most appropriate option is to pursue Direct Award Process C. There is an existing provider for the service and that existing provider is satisfying the original contract and will likely satisfy the proposed new contract, and the services do not meet the considerable change threshold as defined in the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023.

Equality Implications:

The equality Implications have been identified and mitigated.

(Please note that Council have agreed care experience should be treated like a protected characteristic.)

Impact on Children and Young People:

Kooth PLC will ensure the provision of Kooth in Sefton - an online mental health support service for children and young people that offers a range of online support including confidential and anonymous 1 to 1 text-based counselling, moderated message boards and forums, and articles.

Kooth provides preventative emotional health and wellbeing support designed to address low level mental health needs of young people. Young people requiring more complex support will be signposted and/or referred to the most appropriate local services. The service has a positive satisfaction rating with 93% of users reporting they would recommend counselling to a friend.

Kooth PLC will provide a universal offer with the aim to engage specific priority groups which have been identified based on clinical and population risk/need, these include:

- Those living in the 20% most deprived areas of Sefton.
- Children with experience of care.
- LGBTQ+ young people.
- Ethnic minority groups.

Individuals with disabilities including SEND.

Climate Emergency Implications:

The recommendations within this report will have a Neutral impact.

It is a re-procurement of existing Public Health commissioned service which does not generate additional impacts on the climate emergency.

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?

(A) Internal Consultations

The Executive Director of Corporate Services & Commercial (FD.7774/24) and the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD.5874/24) have been consulted and any comments have been incorporated into the report.

(B) External Consultations

Council officers have consulted and engaged a number of partners and stakeholders as part of the re-commissioning process, including children and young people, to inform how Kooth can better promote the service and engage with children and young people. These include:

- Children's Services
- Early Help

- Sefton CVS, including partners at the Every Child Matters Forum.
- Mersey Care (0-19 Service)

A survey is currently running on Your Sefton, Your Say and is due to complete on the 22nd September 2024.

Implementation Date for the Decision :

Following the expiry of the “call-in” period for the Cabinet decision.

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Appendices:

The following appendices are attached to this report: Health Equity Assessment Tool