



Scrutiny Review of Post 16 Education

People Select Committee, July 2026

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Forward

[Add in]

Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Chair



Councillor Marilyn Surtees
Chair – People Select Committee



Councillor Paul Weston
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Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

The topic of Post 16 Education directly addresses Priority one: The best start in life to achieve big ambitions Key Move Giving children and young people the best possible start, in an inclusive community where everyone can thrive, as it includes the action to work with Schools and Post-16 providers to increase the number of children and young people in Education, Employment and Training at ages 16 – 18 years, helping to grow their ambitions and meeting the needs of local employers.

What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?

There is a strong Post 16 offer in Stockton-on-Tees, with five providers offering a range of courses and qualifications to fulfil a variety of different passions and career aspirations. Achievement for young people at the end of their Post 16 Education is growing rapidly with a higher than national average A Level pass rate across the Borough of 97.7%.

However, enrolment figures for in Borough providers have been impacted in recent years with more Stockton-on-Tees students choosing to attend out of Borough providers in Middlesbrough and Darlington, who offer similar courses. Only one out of Borough provider beats In Borough A Level A*-B outcomes.

A survey of Young People approaching the end of Year 11 by the Careers team, asking about their readiness for leaving school, found that 13.1% of students had not had a careers discussion at all in advance of sitting their GCSEs. A further 18.1% of students surveyed said they had not made a clear decision about their next steps after school. These findings suggest that Stockton students are largely unaware of the current offer available to them and improvements are needed to the existing communications strategy to effectively reach the providers target audience.

While the number of students completing Post 16 Education is growing, with an increase of over 300 students over 5 years, statistics show that a small minority of 16-17 year olds in the Borough are at risk of or have become NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) since beginning Key Stage 5. Economic inactivity significantly impacts upon an individual's economic growth potential and is often associated with an increased likelihood of involvement in antisocial behaviour and crime. During the 2022/23 academic year, 1.6% more students who attended a Post 16 provider IN BOROUGH (5.3%) dropped out in Year 12 than those OUT OF BOROUGH (3.7%) Overall, 7% of our Year 13 students, whether they attended a Post 16 provider in or out of Borough were NEET by the end of November 2024. These numbers are much too high.

A minority of students choose to dropout within the first three months of starting a Post 16 qualification, therefore a core focus of the Post 16 enrichment strategy is to improve transitional support. Post 16 education involves an increase in independence, greater difficulty of work and a new structure to the day. These factors are often responsible for dropouts, but it is also important to consider other external factors such as health and wellbeing, financial situation, and access to transport. Transition from secondary school to Post 16 education need

to be as seamless as possible, helping Young People to overcome some of these factors and avoid becoming NEET.

Therefore, areas that would benefit from development include:

- Attraction & Retention rates
- Current NEET statistics
- Internal awareness of strategic funding opportunities
- Communication & Marketing of our offer

The review aims to consider the current position, challenges, and proposed solutions in the Stockton-on-Tees post 16 provision. This will inform the Post 16 enrichment strategy currently in development.

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- How well are stakeholders collaborating to minimise any challenges?
- What careers advice do school leavers receive prior to applying for courses/apprenticeships?
- How do school leavers find out about Post-16 providers and courses available?
- What extra-curriculum activities do Post-16 providers provide and how are these marketed?
- Are there any extra benefits that can be offered to school leavers by Post-16 providers?
- What pastoral arrangements are in place at Post-16 provisions?
- What financial support is available for school leavers to apply for?
- Which courses/providers are young people dropping out from?

Provide an initial view as to how this review could lead to efficiencies, improvements and/or transformation:

In considering the challenges and proposed solution to the current Post 16 offer the review will aim to assist in increasing attraction and retention of post-16 education, reduce the number of young people becoming NEET, and lead to better outcomes for the young people of the Borough.

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's scrutiny review of Post-16 Education.
- 1.2. There is a strong Post-16 offer in Stockton-on-Tees, with five providers offering a range of courses and qualifications to fulfil a variety of different passions and career aspirations, namely Conyers School and Sixth Form, Egglescliffe School and Sixth Form College, Stockton Sixth Form College, and The Education Training Collective (Etc), which has two site, Bede Sixth Form College, Stockton Riverside College. Etc also have the NETA site which has an engineering focus.
- 1.3. The review aimed to consider the current position, challenges and proposed solutions in Stockton-on-Tees' post-16 provision. In doing so, the review aimed to assist in increasing attraction and retention of post-16 education, reduce the number of young people becoming NEET, and lead to better outcomes for the young people of the Borough.
- 1.4. A Post-16 Partnership has been established to enhance strategic collaboration and communication between providers, improve the quality of education and training in the borough, share best practice and innovative approaches, identify and address common challenges facing the sector, and develop and implement strategies to promote the offer more widely. The partnership has senior representatives from all the providers, careers service, school support, education. Economic development and other relevant stakeholders.

Excellence for All

- 1.5. While there is a natural competitiveness between the providers, who are seeking to recruit students to their courses, genuine collaboration is taking place via the Post-16 Partnership to improve outcomes across the borough. The Excellence for All Work Strand is focussing on ensuring there is a strong offer with good outcomes across the borough that encourage students to enrol at in-borough providers. Two trials have taken place to address the outcomes: Business Mentor Support – Excellence for All, which aims to support students fulfil their full potential and bridge the gap between education and work; and Teach Meets which aims to bring teachers together to share best practice, practical innovations, and personal insights.
- 1.6. Further collaboration taking place includes providers receiving monthly information on young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), information on funding opportunities as these arise, and local employer information and business intelligence in terms of gaps and areas of growth, with sectors now speaking directly to students which has proved to be more powerful than providers sharing the information with students. Partnerships are in place with providers to offer industry placements, provide the learning for apprenticeships, and co-create curriculum with employers in key growth sectors.

Communication and Marketing

- 1.7. The Committee heard how the different providers are communicating and marketing their courses to schools both within the Borough and the wider Tees Valley area through a range of engagement activities targeted at Years 9 – 11, however there are some activities regarding careers choices aimed at younger year groups. Engagement and recruitment activity begins in September and continues throughout the year.

- 1.8. The Post-16 Partnership Communication and Marketing Work Strand aims to work together to keep students local and has developed a communications and marketing initiative spanning industry engagement, careers provision, transitions, and enrichment programmes. Activities that have taken place include creating a framework to map current engagement activity and identifying growth sectors and businesses, producing a Post-16 brochure showcasing each provider as part of place brand messaging of Stockton-on-Tees being a place to study, live, work and play, and Mystery Shopper exercises.
- 1.9. The Work Strand is now building on this foundation by developing a school engagement toolkit available for all staff showcasing the local offer, Alumni success stories profiling local people who built careers in Stockton-on-Tees and Digital ambassadors advocating for Stockton-on-Tees. Postcards directing prospective students to the Post-16 Brochure and a glossary of terms making this easier to understand are also being developed and a Stockton Post Secondary Pre-Open Event is planned for September 2026, giving young people and parents a chance to get initial information on all providers in one convenient location
- 1.10. Providers have seen an increase in engagement from school leavers at events and this has resulted in a significant increase in the number of applications to all in-borough providers. It should be noted, however, that school leavers may apply for more than one course including at providers out of borough.

Careers Advice

- 1.11. Providing early advice and guidance is considered essential in supporting young people to choose the right post-16 pathway for their talents and ambitions and secondary schools and colleges have a duty to provide careers education to all their students in Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 5. Schools fulfil this duty either in-house by directly employing a qualified Careers Adviser, or by contracting with a Careers Guidance provider. SBC's Careers has contracts with five schools. It also currently provides targeted support to Year 11 residents in Stockton-on-Tees who require further support, with the demand and complexity increasing significantly over time.
- 1.12. Both universal and targeted Careers Guidance is also available in all colleges/Years 12 and 13. This include in-house staff and SBC Careers, who currently offer progressive tailored support. SBC Careers is aiming to develop systems across colleges where they are made aware of declining attendance, attainment, or behaviour early so that support can be offered before crisis or students leave.
- 1.13. A Phase 2 Transformation Outcome-based review regarding Opportunities for Young People in Employment (OYPE) has been taking place at the same time of the Scrutiny Review, with a focus on operational redesign of the SBC Careers Service current service model to improve NEET outcomes via early intervention and digital first as well as operating within a reduced budget. The review is ongoing and will be undertaken in alignment with, and complementary to, the Scrutiny Review of Post-16 Education, ensuring consistency and that Scrutiny recommendations are included. The findings and outputs from this review will be considered alongside the Scrutiny Review and will inform recommendations.
- 1.14. In addition to careers advice and guidance provided in schools and colleges, the Employment & Training Hub has also been delivering programmes for young people of the borough to raise their knowledge, ambitions, and personal skills. These include Skills for Success, Excellence for All, Youth Guarantee Trailblazer, Care Experience Young Person Recruitment Coordinator, and Industry Insights.

- 1.15. The Careers Network Work Strand supports colleges to identify gaps in career education, share good practice and highlight innovative and inspiring opportunities. This has included working with Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), who are relaunching their Business Directory, and facilitating dialogue between schools and colleges and the TVCA Work Experience Coordinator. Roadshows activities are also being developed for Key Stage 3 Work Experience Week and “How To” guides shared for Key Stage 4 Work Experience Week. Finally, a Parent & Carer guide to careers has been developed.

Transitions from School to Post 16 Provision

- 1.16. The Committee were informed that the Transitions Work Strand aims to strengthen retention and progression as well as understand challenges faced by providers and how best to give advice and guidance to young people and parents/carers. A student survey has been conducted to find out what influences their decisions when applying for courses. There is a wide range of courses available, all providers are rated as Outstanding or Good by OFSTED, and outcomes are competitive. The survey results reiterated that the in-borough provision offer is competitive.
- 1.17. However, the survey highlighted that transport is an important factor, with young people choosing to attend providers that are quick and easy to get to. In some areas of the Borough it is easier to travel to out-of-borough providers, with direct and frequent bus routes, rather than travel across town which may take longer and require changing buses.
- 1.18. The survey also highlighted early engagement and awareness as being important when making post-16 choices. A shared language and messaging are important to help young people and parents/carers understand the different pathways, and a Jargon Buster has been proposed to simplify the process.
- 1.19. SBC teams are assisting in the transition to post-16 by ensuring providers have the information they need to support vulnerable learners in to the right provider/courses, and the multi-agency event Preparing for Adulthood Day proved to be effective. However, there are still challenges including late identification of non-attenders and inconsistent application systems, and a Borough-wide data framework using both school and college data management systems is being developed to strengthen this.

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

- 1.20. In April members were informed that NEET was 7.3%, a rise from 5% in 2020. The impact of additional staff resources in Leaving Care Team and Employment & Training Hub has not yet been seen in the national data for Care Experienced young people NEET rate, however smaller caseloads and increased proactive support for those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has had a positive impact on reducing the NEET rate.
- 1.21. The OYPE review that has taken place is proposing a new service model and operational redesign to improve awareness of opportunities, strengthen transitions, and influence a reduction in NEET rates.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- 1.22. The Committee recognises the importance of building on the strong foundations already in place for post-16 collaboration and improving outcomes. The Committee concludes that with sustained focus and collective commitment, there is significant opportunity to further enhance post-16 education in Stockton-on-Tees, improving participation, reducing NEET levels, and enabling more young people to achieve their potential while contributing to the borough's future economic growth.

1.23. The Committee recommends that:

1. Transition support is strengthened by developing a consistent borough-wide transition framework between schools and post-16 providers, including clear pre-enrolment guidance, earlier course matching, data sharing, and structured support during the first term/end of Year 12 when drop-out risk is highest.
2. Early warning systems for flagging declining attendance, behaviour, and attainment are embedded across all post-16 providers with clear escalation and intervention pathways are in place before disengagement reaches crisis point.
3. Collaborative initiatives that are showing signs of successfully assisting young people, such as Teach Meets, Skills for Success, and Business Mentor Support, are expanded to all providers and prioritising subjects with historically smaller student cohorts.
4. Communication between all providers and young people and their parents/carers regarding the Post-16 in-Borough offer is strengthened
5. Careers education is embedded in to the curriculum in all schools and post-16 providers to ensure young people choose the right pathways for them and reduce early withdrawal by:
 - ensuring careers advice and guidance/post 16 options are available from Year 9 (or earlier) to enable young people to build their knowledge
 - developing resources and staff training to show how subject-specific knowledge and skills translate into employment, business and industry
 - give clear course expectations, progression routes and employment outcomes to reduce early withdrawal from and dissatisfaction with courses.
6. Labour-market intelligence and cohort growth data is utilised to plan academic, vocational and apprenticeship provision more strategically, to ensure capacity keeps pace with demand and competition between age groups does not disadvantage younger learners.
7. Cross-provider enrichment opportunities are broadened to not only create a more competitive offer compared with regional competitors but also raise aspirations.
8. Post-16 providers explore collaborative approaches and strategic networks to address transport barriers, highlighted as a significant influence on post-16 choice including connectivity to all in-Borough post-16 providers and cost, so young people can access efficient, cost effective in-borough provision.
9. Post-16 providers ensure that vocational courses provide coherent pathways to meet industry requirements

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's scrutiny review of Post-16 Education.
- 2.2. There is a strong post-16 offer in Stockton-on-Tees, with five providers offering a range of courses and qualifications to fulfil a variety of different passions and career aspirations. It is imperative that students choose courses that align best with their talents and ambitions to ensure successful outcomes for their future. While in some cases this may be a course at an out of Borough provider, for most students there should be a place in-borough for them.
- 2.3. The review aimed to consider the current position, challenges, and proposed solutions in the Stockton-on-Tees post 16 provision. In doing so, the review aimed to assist in increasing attraction and retention of post-16 education, reduce the number of young people becoming NEET, and lead to better outcomes for the young people of the Borough.
- 2.4. The Committee undertook the following key lines of enquiry:
 - How well are stakeholders collaborating to minimise any challenges?
 - What careers advice do school leavers receive prior to applying for courses/apprenticeships?
 - How do school leavers find out about Post-16 providers and courses available?
 - What extra-curriculum activities do Post-16 providers provide and how are these marketed?
 - Are there any extra benefits that can be offered to school leavers by Post-16 providers?
 - What pastoral arrangements are in place at Post-16 provisions?
 - What financial support is available for school leavers to apply for?
 - Which courses/providers are young people dropping out from?
- 2.5. Contributions were sought and subsequently received from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Education and Inclusion Service, Careers Service, and Employment & Training Hub. Contributions were also received from several partners leading on the work strands of the Post-16 Partnership, including Egglecliffe School and Sixth Form College, Stockton Sixth Form College, and Education Training Collective. The results of a student survey carried out by the Post-16 Partnership were also shared with the Committee.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 There are five providers of post-16 education within Stockton-on-Tees: Conyers School and Sixth Form, Egglecliffe School and Sixth Form, Stockton Sixth Form College and The Education Training Collective (Etc) who have two sites, Bede Sixth Form College and Stockton Riverside College. Etc also have the NETA site which has an engineering focus. There is a higher than national average A Level pass rate across the Borough of 98% in 2025, however the rate of students achieving A*-B grades at A level is below the national average at 44.2% across the Borough.
- 3.2 Enrolment data for both 2024/25 and 2025/26 shows that over 40% of young people in Stockton-on-Tees are choosing to attend out-of-Borough providers, with the most popular of these being Middlesbrough College and Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form.

- 3.3 A Post-16 Partnership has been established to enhance strategic collaboration and communication between post-16 education providers, improve the quality of education and training in the borough, share best practice and innovative approaches, identify and address common challenges facing the sector, and develop and implement strategies to promote the offer more widely. The partnership has senior representatives from all the post-16 providers, Career Service, School Support, Education, Economic Development and other relevant stakeholders. Four work strands have been created to deliver tangible actions: Excellence for All, Communications and Marketing, Careers, and Transitions
- 3.4 In addition, the Children and Young People's Appreciative Inquiry in Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment made recommendations that impact on post-16 provision. These are regarding improving communication, extending the enrichment offer, strengthening understanding of career pathways, and strengthen transition arrangements. Each of the recommendations are being driven forward by senior officers.

4.0 Evidence

Excellence for All: Collaboration and Support

- 4.1. Challenges for recruitment to the in-borough providers include the curriculum offer, curriculum success, and the incentives that are being offered by some out-of-borough providers. While there is a natural competitiveness between the providers, who are seeking to recruit students to their courses, genuine collaboration is taking place via the Post-16 Partnership to improve outcomes across the borough. The Excellence for All Work Strand is focussing on ensuring there is a strong offer with good outcomes across the borough that encourage students to enrol at in-borough providers. Two trials have taken place to address the outcomes, business mentor support and teach meet.

Business Mentor Support – Excellence for All

- 4.2. Business Mentor Support is a collaboration between Bede Sixth Form College and Egglescliffe School and Sixth Form College initially to bring together business and education. It is being led by the Employment and Training Hub with senior staff in schools and colleges invited to contribute to the plan.
- 4.3. The colleges have identified students who are academically vulnerable, are not carrying on to university, or do not know what their next step will be, to take part in a series of interventions and masterclasses to improve their confidence, study skills, leadership skills, employability and knowledge of business sectors. Masterclasses have included communication skills, interviewing the mentor, and understanding business sectors where they were asked to research salaries, qualification, and interests in different sectors.
- 4.4. The initiative aims to support students to fulfil their full potential both academically and personally and bridge the gap between education and the world of work.

- 4.5. Feedback from the students taking part in the trial has been positive and it is planned to be extended to other schools and colleges in the future.

Teach Meet

- 4.6. Teach meets bring together teachers from different providers to share best practice, practical innovations, and personal insights on teaching. Two Teach Meets were held in November 2025 and February 2026, focussed on eight subject areas, to discuss, plan and implement a series of interventions to achieve stronger exam outcomes. The subjects chosen were those that are either underperforming or only had one class in a college with limited discussion with colleagues.
- 4.7. The focus of the November session included what do students enjoy and are successful in, what do students find challenging, which areas of the specification are challenging, and what can colleges do together to close the gaps. The February session planned masterclasses on exam skills, essay skills and question analysis to enable students to achieve B and above grades.
- 4.8. Staff feedback was positive, with them valuing the time spent collaborating with their colleagues.

Further collaboration

- 4.9. Providers are receiving monthly information on Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) as well as funding opportunities as these arise.
- 4.10. Providers are also receiving local employer information and business intelligence in terms of gaps and areas of growth. While providers previously shared this information with their students, the sectors are now speaking directly to students through the collaborations in place, e.g. Industry Speaker Programmes, and this has proved to be more powerful.
- 4.11. Employer demand is driving the balance between academic and vocational training that is available within the borough's providers. Stockton Sixth Form College has a number of partnerships with industry to offer placements in Aviation, Engineering and Health, giving real world experience and developing hands-on technical/clinical skills, while Etc provide the learning for apprenticeships. Stockton Sixth Form College co-create curriculum with employers in key growth sectors of Health & Care, Advanced Manufacturing, and Digital Sectors, to understand the skills and knowledge that they require and supporting the Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plan Alignment (LSIP).

Communication and Marketing

- 4.12. The Committee heard how the different providers are communicating and marketing their courses to schools both within the Borough and the wider Tees Valley area through a range of engagement activities. These include, but not limited to:
- [Presentations and Y10 – Y11 Assemblies](#)
 - [School Liaison Programmes, monthly newsletters to schools etc.](#)
 - [Lunch Drop-ins/Careers Corner](#)
 - [Parent Evenings & Advice Evenings](#)
 - [Open Evenings Series](#)

- Careers Fairs (in school and large events)
- Campus Tours (1-1 and groups) and taster sessions
- Explorer Days providing immersive experiences
- Alumni Engagement with regular sessions connecting with successful graduates
- Careers In... days and Y9 – Y10 Careers Guidance
- Mock Interviews
- Revision Support events
- Preparing for work
- Application Sessions and Workshops / Y10 – Y11 Transition Support
- Digital Partnerships – websites social media and digital campaigns

- 4.13. Within the engagement activity, clarity is provided on the academic and technical pathways such as vocational/T-Level/apprenticeship routes, A-Level pathways, engineering and other industry pathways.
- 4.14. Engagement and recruitment activity begins in September and continues throughout the year. Recruitment activity is targeted at Years 9 – 11, however there is some engagement activity regarding career choices aimed at younger year groups. Providers such as Etc noted that they support young people throughout their decision-making journey – awareness, guidance, experience and transition.
- 4.15. Providers believe that it is imperative that the right learner is on the right course with the right provider and therefore give impartial advice and guidance. They will signpost to other providers, whether that be in-borough or outside of borough, when a school leaver has a specific interest that they do not cater for.

Work Strand Collaboration

- 4.16. The Post 16 Partnership Communication and Marketing Work Strand aims to work together to keep students local and has developed a communications and marketing initiative spanning industry engagement, careers provision, transitions, and enrichment programmes. It seeks to:
- Promote equitable access to local post-16 providers
 - Develop compelling messaging about the benefits of studying locally
 - Create a compelling case for school heads to support local providers
 - Showcase career opportunities aligned with growth sectors in the borough
- 4.17. The Work Strand has established the foundations for promoting local post-16 education and understanding choice factors. This has included creating a framework to map current engagement activity with parents and schools and identifying growth sectors and businesses.
- 4.18. Place brand messaging has been seen as a key factor, showcasing Stockton-on-Tees as a place not only to study but also “live, work, play”. A post-16 brochure has been produced and promoted via social media which showcases each of the providers within the Borough, highlighting the reasons to study at each and giving student testimony.

- 4.19. Mystery Shopper exercises have taken place at Middlesbrough College and Queen Elizabeth open event, via colleagues in in-borough providers attending these events with their own school leaving aged children and reporting back. The findings from these suggests that providers outside of the borough have similar offers to in-borough providers, and there is some duplication. Marketed goodie bags offered by some providers are seen as a simple incentive tool being used, as they act as a visual prompt when school leavers are making their decisions.
- 4.20. The Work Strand is now building on the foundation work already carried out by developing resources and evidence to make a compelling case for students to stay in-borough for their post-16 education. A school engagement toolkit has been developed which will be available for all staff within schools showcasing the local offer. This will enable all those working in schools to be aware of the opportunities and be able to give simple advice and suggestions. Other activities include:
- [Alumni success stories profiling local people who built careers in Stockton-on-Tees](#)
 - [Digital ambassadors advocating for Stockton-on-Tees](#)
 - [Postcards directing prospective students to the Post-16 Brochure and a glossary of terms making the Brochure easier to understand](#)
 - [A Stockton Post Secondary Pre-Open Event, which is planned for September 2026, giving young people and parents a chance to get initial information on all providers in one convenient location.](#)

Impact

- 4.21. Providers have seen an increase in engagement from school leavers at events. Etc reported in March 2026 that they have seen a 42% increase in attendance at open events from 2022/23, and Stockton Sixth Form College reported an 86% growth in open evening attendance. Stockton Sixth Form College also reported a 48.26% growth in website traffic.
- 4.22. The increase in engagement has resulted in a significant increase in the number of applications to in-borough providers:
- [Egglescliffe Sixth Form had received their target of 170 application by January 2026, 50 more applications at the same point in the previous academic year.](#)
 - [Stockton Sixth Form College reported in March they have had an 89.4% year-on-year increase in active applications](#)
 - [Etc reported in March that their year-to-date active application had increased 24.4% from the previous year, with a 6.64% increase from Stockton-on-Tees school leavers, and a 57% increase in active application over a four-year period. Etc. enrolments include 695 students from 'out of borough'](#)
- 4.23. This increase is encouraging, giving an indication of the number of students expected in the September 2026 intake and thereby the work streams initiatives success. It should be noted, however, that school leavers may apply for more than one course, in some cases as many as five providers including providers out of borough, therefore not all applications will result in enrolment.

Careers Advice

- 4.24. Providing early advice and guidance is considered essential in supporting young people to choose the right post-16 pathway for their talents and ambitions. Secondary schools and colleges have a duty to provide careers education to all their students in Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 5, typically including at least one career discussion per student, with additional support available depending on resources. The Gatsby Benchmarks provides a clear framework of how to deliver this duty, covering areas such as a stable careers programme, labour market information, personalised support, linking curriculum with careers, employer engagement, workplace experience, and encounters with further and higher education.
- 4.25. Schools fulfil this duty either in-house by directly employing a qualified Careers Adviser, or by contracting with a Careers Guidance provider. In Stockton-on-Tees Borough, four schools provide in-house provision, while the remaining schools contract one of three providers: CareerWave, Prospects, or SBC's Careers with this element of the Careers Service being a traded service receiving full cost recovery. SBC Career's has contracts with Egglecliffe, Ian Ramsey, Northfield, St Patrick's and Red House schools.
- 4.26. SBC Careers also currently provide targeted support to Year 11 residents in Stockton-on-Tees who require further support, with the demand and complexity increasing significantly over time, from 325 young people in 2013 to over 700 in 2026. The support provided is mainly 1:1 Careers Guidance discussion but can also include engaging with parents and carers, small groups work, home visits, tracking progress, supporting applications and visits to providers, identifying barriers to progression and offering support to overcome these. This activity can support all eight Gatsby Benchmarks; however the service is very focused on identification of needs to facilitate accurate targeting of support and providing destination data to schools and ensuring everyone has individual careers guidance by the end of Year 11. SBC Careers aims to ensure that young people know what they want to do after school by the end of February each year.
- 4.27. Both universal and targeted Careers Guidance is also available in colleges/Years 12 and 13. All colleges have Careers staff who work across the whole college, and they may also be involved in recruitment to the college as well as progression from college to another opportunity.
- 4.28. SBC Careers currently have Progression Advisers in all colleges, offering progressive support tailored to risk levels of drop out/leave to NEET. This could be working on a request basis or having a weekly presence in the college, however the service proactively offers support at the start of the Year 12 and towards the end of Year 12, which are the key transition points where a young person may leave to NEET. SBC is also contracted to provide guidance to complement the Stockton Sixth Form College in-house Careers support. The service is aiming to develop systems across colleges where they are made aware of declining attendance, attainment, or behaviour early so that support can be offered before crisis or the student leave.
- 4.29. During the review the Committee were aware that a Phase 2 Transformation Outcome-based review regarding Opportunities for Young People in Employment (OYPE) was taking place. The OYPE review focused on operational redesign of the current service model for the Careers Service to improve NEET outcomes via early intervention and digital first. It also had a clear remit to operate within a reduced budget, in accordance with the Medium-term Financial Plan (MFTP). This review therefore has direct links to the Committee's review, which is aiming to improve post-16 outcomes, and will consider the outcomes and recommendations from the Scrutiny Review.

Work experience

- 4.30. Work experience for both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are a priority for schools and colleges, particularly with the incoming Work Experience Guarantee legislation, which aims to ensure every young person completes two weeks of meaningful work experience during school or college. Work experience is seen as a useful tool in re-engaging students, demonstrating how focussing at school relates to future employment. SBC will be consulting with schools to choose whether to deliver work experience activities themselves, ask teams across SBC including Careers and Employment & Training Hub to deliver work experience activities, or ask SBC to broker businesses to deliver work experience.
- 4.31. Key Stage 3 Work Experience Week can be split over the different year groups, building on each year, and activities focus on the skills needed for different industries. Key Stage 4 Work Experience Week can also include activities rather than a full week placement. Some schools may arrange work placements for those students who have clear career goals but may also arrange a split week of work placement and activities such as visiting different employers, or a week of activities for young people who are uncertain of their career path.

Employment & Training Hub

- 4.32. The Employment & Training Hub delivers programmes and support for all residents and businesses in the Borough. Businesses are engaged with the programmes, and all delivery is designed to meet skills shortages, future skills requirements, and benefit businesses Social Value requirements.
- 4.33. The Hub utilises the Equalex framework, which is a comprehensive structured, and inclusive model for delivering modern, meaningful careers education. It ensures young people progressively gain the skills, knowledge, insight and confidence needed to make informed decisions and transition successfully into the world of work. Programmes for young people of the borough includes:

- **Skills for Success**

A programme for secondary school students targeted for disengaged young people facing barriers. It links education with industry by showcasing opportunities in key sectors and personal skills. It includes guidance and support from business mentors, industry visits, sharing business intelligence, and team building and individual activities. At the end of the course a celebration event is held where students give a pitch for themselves. The feedback from the programme has been very positive. Students complete a survey at the end of the programme and 100% state they have a clear aspiration for their chosen career based on the input and visits throughout the project. In addition, schools have reported that students who have completed the programme have an improved attitude and engagement resulting in improved learning and progress, with a 60% increase in positive behaviour points and 82% decrease in negative points, and 93% are now on their individual targets for English and 71% are on their targets in maths.

- **Excellence for All**

A targeted pilot programmed for Years 12/13 outlined in paragraphs 4.2 – 4.5

- **Youth Guarantee Trailblazer**

Access to six months (changing to five months from 2026/27 financial year) paid work experience for any NEET young person aged 16-21 in Tees Valley. It is targeted support to young people who are

disengaged or at risk, helping them overcome barriers and move towards education, employment, or training. SBC is the only Trailblazer programme in England that is offering paid work experience.

- Care Experienced Young Person Recruitment Coordinator

Supports young people to identify the most appropriate pathway for their needs and goals, receiving tailored guidance and access to opportunities that build skills, confidence, and clear progression routes. Since its launch in October 2025 over 50 young people have been supported and in April 2026 27 of those have found employment.

- Industry Insights

A programme for disengaged NEET young people, it offers clear understanding of the world of work and highlights local opportunities via business mentors and industry visits.

- 4.34. In addition to the programmes being delivered at the Hub, it has been highlighted that more students are asking for Maths and English courses, with colleges offering these as stand-alone courses. The Employment & Training Hub, working with the SBC Careers, have procured online provision which students welcomed and are well attended.

Careers Network – Work Strand Collaboration

- 4.35. SBC have been asked to support colleges to identify gaps, share good practice, and highlight innovative and inspiring opportunities so that schools and colleges can decide how it fits into their provision. Schools and colleges have highlighted five key priorities for the Careers Network:

- Build a directory of businesses who engage well with school aged young people and can deliver various engagement activities
- Key Stage 3 Work Experience Week activities to inspire and inform young people in Years 7 – 9
- Key Stage 4 Work Experience Week support including identification of duties, contact with businesses, potential coordination of weeks across schools.
- Parent & Carer guide to Careers with tips on how to prepare young people for life after school
- Careers into the Curriculum such as support in developing “off-the-shelf” resources, how do skills and qualities advanced by each subject translate into the world of work

- 4.36. Progress is being made on four of the five priorities, with the Committee being informed in May 2026 that:

- Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) are relaunching their Business Directory and the Network has been updated and discussed how school and colleges can influence this.
- Roadshows activities are being developed for Key Stage 3 Work Experience Week, utilising the Tees Valley Care and Health Innovation Zone, Regeneration work at Tees Central, and building on Skills for Success.
- “How to” guides have been shared for Key Stage 4 Work Experience Week and the TVCA Work Experience Coordinator is due to meet with the Network.
- Content for Parent & Carer guide to careers has been agreed and at design stage.

- 4.37. Careers into the Curriculum is the lowest priority for schools and colleges and the Network had not started on tackling this. However, TVCA already provide support including resources through Tees Valley Careers website.

Transitions from School to Post 16 Provision

- 4.38. The Post 16 Partnership Transitions Work Strand aim to strengthen retention and progression as well as understand challenges faced by providers and how best to give advice and guidance to young people and parents/carers based on a collective understanding from all post-16 settings. There is a strong offer of post-16 provision within the Borough with a wide range of opportunities, all providers being rated as Outstanding and Good in their last OFSTED inspections, and outcomes competitive. While this is a great benefit for young people in the Borough, the amount of choice can be confusing for both young people and parents/carers. The academic language used can also be confusing, with different and changing types of courses available e.g. A Levels, T Levels, etc. A central Jagon Buster resource has been proposed to simplify the process.
- 4.39. The Work Strand conducted a survey of current students attending in-borough post-16 providers to find out what influenced their decisions when applying for courses, to which 340 students responded. The results reiterated that the in-borough provision was competitive, including different routes e.g. A level, vocational, and apprenticeships. Accessibility and convenience of transport as well as early engagement, including open events, were highlighted as the main drivers when making decisions.
- 4.40. Friendship groups are also considered to be an influence on young people's choices. This has an impact on retention as friendship groups can potentially change once attending college and may lead to students realising the course they chose is not for them. It is at this point that they may leave the provider and, if at an out of borough provider, return to in-borough provision.

Transport

- 4.41. When surveyed 82% of students said travel influenced their decision when considering and applying to post-16 providers, choosing to attend providers that are quick and easy to get to. It is also important for parents/carers to feel reassured their young person is safe travelling to their provider.
- 4.42. It has been found that if a young person lives within walking distance to a post-16 provider, that provider tends to be their destination of choice. For young people who do not have the option to walk to a provider, transport can be difficult. They may need to take two or three buses to get to a provider in a different part of the Borough from where they live, which can increase travel time. Issues can also arise when students or buses are running late, increasing the time it takes to get to their provider and making them either late for or miss the lesson.
- 4.43. In some areas of the Borough, it is easier to travel to out-of-borough providers on either provider or public transport, with direct bus routes, which may also be more frequent and/or take less time to get to their destination.
- 4.44. While details of bus timetables are shared at engagement events, some providers are providing free bus passes and putting on free buses to outlining parts of the Borough e.g. buses from Thornaby and Ingleby Barwick to Stockton Sixth Form College. There is, however, an economic challenge in doing so.

Early Engagement

- 4.45. As highlighted in paragraph 4.24 early awareness is key, using a shared language and messaging. This will help young people build their knowledge and understanding of the careers that they are interested in and the pathways available from when they choose their GCSE options in Year 9. It will then impact positively on their decisions at post-16, ensuring that they apply and enrol on the right course for them and reduce the likelihood of students dropping out and/or changing courses.
- 4.46. Early awareness and shared language/messaging is also key to helping parents better understand how GCSE outcomes can link to post-16 progression.
- 4.47. Work Experience is an important part of early engagement, helping young people to understand the industries and careers in the local area. Paragraph 4.30 notes how the SBC is developing borough-wide programmes to comply with the Work Experience Guarantee.
- 4.48. It is noted in paragraphs 4.12 – 4.20, that there is a wide range of events and engagement taking place for Years 9 – 11. The student survey carried out indicated that 73% of the 2025/6 in-borough cohort attended open evenings and 71% attended taster sessions. This illustrates the importance of these events in attracting applications. The proactiveness of the SBC in working with schools and colleges to promote post-16 provision in the previous two years has been acknowledged by the Post-16 Partnership.
- 4.49. The work of SBC to ensure providers have the information they need to support vulnerable learners into the right provider/course and build relationships has also been acknowledged. This assists in the transition to post-16 provision and retention. SBC Transitions Team has introduced person-centred planning from age 14 for students with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCPs) and those involved with social care. The Preparing for Adulthood Day that has been held proved to be an effective way of multi-agency working for supporting vulnerable learners and is therefore planned to be repeated.

Data Sharing

- 4.50. Despite the work being carried out there are still challenges in the support of vulnerable learners, including late identification of non-attenders and inconsistent application systems. Greater data sharing and clarity between schools and colleges is therefore needed and this assists not just vulnerable learners, but all young people, in the transition to post-16 providers. It can ensure that young people are integrated into the provider quickly and remove any barriers.
- 4.51. The sharing of data must take into account General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), and providers only collect data that they need to enable a smooth transition. There will be some young people and parent/carers who may be reluctant to consent to sharing their data for differing reasons, including that they wish to have a 'fresh start' Providers are explaining the reasons why the data is needed to reassure young people and their parents/carers in these cases.
- 4.52. The Transitions Work Strand have agreed to work collaboratively to strengthen support and improve processes in these areas, and a Borough-wide data framework using both school and college data management systems is being developed.

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

- 4.53. NEET has risen in Stockton-on-Tees from 5.0% in 2020, 5.2% in 2023, to 7.4% in 2025. In April members were informed that NEET was 7.3%, and SBC was 127th of 151 Local Authorities. While the impact of additional staff resource in Leaving Care Team and Employment & Training Hub on the NEET rate for Care Experienced Young People is yet to be seen in the national data, there are early signs of impact at service level. However, smaller caseloads and increased proactive support in post-16 for those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) has impacted the NEET rate, with both reducing (SEN Support from 21.5% in 2024 to 17.4% in 2025/EHCP from 18.9% in 2024 to 16.5% in 2025).
- 4.54. While there are national issues influencing NEET, including attendance and mental health amongst others, it is suggested that the significant increase of the post-16 cohort in Stockton-on-Tees is having an impact on the level of NEET in the borough, with there not being enough post-16 opportunities available. This has resulted in 16/17-year-olds competing with 18/19-year-olds for apprenticeships and employment opportunities, with the older cohort being more successful.
- 4.55. The OYPE review, noted in paragraph 4.29 is proposing a new SBC Careers service model and operational redesign to improve opportunities, strengthen transitions, and influence a reduction in NEET rates.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1. The Committee's review has noted that Stockton-on-Tees benefits from a broad and high-quality post-16 education offer, with a wide range of academic and vocational pathways available and a strong overall A-level pass rate.
- 5.2. The review found that the Post-16 Partnership has created an effective shared framework for strategic collaboration with four active work strands: Excellence for All, Communications & Marketing, Careers, and Transitions. Providers are now engaging in cross-college activity such as Teach Meets, Business Mentor/Excellence for All Programmes, industry speaker sessions, and shared employer intelligence. This has led to an emergence of a culture of genuine collaboration despite being competitors, and are already contributing to increased engagement, rising application numbers, and stronger alignment with local labour market needs.
- 5.3. The innovative practice taking place, e.g. Business Mentor Support and Skills for Success to improve confidence, employability skills and sector understanding, and Teach Meets to facilitate sharing of best practice to raise A*-B attainment, show early signs of strengthening outcomes and could be scaled borough-wide and subject-wide.
- 5.4. The Careers Network supports schools and colleges to meet statutory duties, reduce duplication and improve quality. It has made progress on four of the five priorities identified by schools and colleges: Creating a business directory, developing KS3 work experience activities, support KS4 work experience, create parent & carer career guidance. SBC Careers targeted support, dedicated

roles, smaller caseloads, person-centred planning from age 14 and programmes such as Youth Trailblazers are beginning to show positive outcomes.

- 5.5. The new school engagement toolkit aims to address inconsistencies in careers advice by ensuring all school staff can confidently promote the local offer. A central “jargon buster” is also being developed to assist with navigating the options available and avoid overwhelming students and parents.
- 5.6. Employer engagement has been strengthened, with providers receiving consistent labour-market intelligence and employers speaking directly to students to support real-world understanding and raise aspirations. Employer engagement is also shaping local provision, being involved in curriculum development and work placements.
- 5.7. Providers are engaging extensively with schools and there is a cohesive, collaborative, marketing approach in place-branding – e.g. Post 16 brochure, alumni stories and “live, work, play” messaging. Joint marketing efforts have begun to show impact, with significant increases in application and attendance at open days across in-borough providers.
- 5.8. However, the review highlighted that a number of challenges remain. Transition from secondary school to post-16 education is a risk point for retention, with a minority of pupils dropping out within the first three months of Year 12. Increased independence, academic challenge, transport issues (connectivity to all post-16 providers and cost), wellbeing, financial pressures and unmet expectations all contribute to disengagement. Poor course matching and unclear expectations increase the likelihood of early drop-out and NEET outcomes. There are inconsistent transition arrangements between schools and colleges and systems to flag declining attendance/engagement and prevent drop-out are not yet embedded consistently.
- 5.9. The Committee recognise that NEET levels are high with 7.5% of Year 12 and Year 13 students NEET or not known, placing Stockton-on-Tees among the highest level of NEET nationally. In addition, a growing post-16 cohort has increased competition for apprenticeships and entry-level jobs, especially between 16-17 and 18-19 year olds. Learners are increasingly choosing vocational pathways, which also have higher drop-out rates. Provider capacity and demand-led curriculum planning all require ongoing strategic oversight.
- 5.10. A major factor influencing post-16 destinations is transport with 82% of young people highlighting this when surveyed. Out of Borough providers can be more accessible in terms of public transport than in Borough providers, depending on where in the borough the young person resides. Friendship groups are another influencing factor in post-16 choices; however these can change during the transition and impact retention. In addition, mystery shopper exercises indicate that while out of borough colleges offer similar provision, incentive-based marketing and branding strategies influence student choice.
- 5.11. Early awareness and guidance using a shared language and messaging are critical, enabling young people to build their knowledge and understanding of the pathways available from when choosing their GCSE options in Year 9. While the Careers Network has made progress on four of its priorities, the Network has not yet focused on careers into the curriculum e.g. developing resources to explain how skills and qualities of subjects translate into the world of work, which would assist in the understanding of career pathways.

- 5.12. To address the issues highlighted by the review, the Committee recognises the importance of building on the strong foundations already in place. Continued strengthening of collaborative working and accessible communications approach, earlier careers education, and improved transitions support will be key to improving outcomes. In particular, ensuring that young people and their families have a clear understanding of local opportunities – and are able to access them without practical barriers – will be essential to increasing retention within the borough.
- 5.13. Overall, the Committee concludes that with sustained focus and collective commitment, there is a significant opportunity to further enhance post-16 provision in Stockton-on-Tees, improving participation, reducing NEET levels, and enabling more young people to achieve their potential while contributing to the borough's future economic growth.

Recommendations

5.14 The Committee recommends that:

1. Transition support is strengthened by developing a consistent borough-wide transition framework between schools and post-16 providers, including clear pre-enrolment guidance, earlier course matching, data sharing, and structured support during the first term/end of Year 12 when drop-out risk is highest.
2. Early warning systems for flagging declining attendance, behaviour, and attainment are embedded across all post-16 providers with clear escalation and intervention pathways are in place before disengagement reaches crisis point.
3. Collaborative initiatives that are showing signs of successfully assisting young people, such as Teach Meets, Skills for Success, and Business Mentor Support, are expanded to all providers and prioritising subjects with historically smaller student cohorts.
4. Communication between all providers and young people and their parents/carers regarding the Post-16 in-Borough offer is strengthened.
5. Careers education is embedded in to the curriculum in all schools and post-16 providers to ensure young people choose the right pathways for them and reduce early withdrawal by:
 - ensuring careers advice and guidance/post 16 options are available from Year 9 (or earlier) to enable young people to build their knowledge
 - developing resources and staff training to show how subject-specific knowledge and skills translate into employment, business and industry
 - give clear course expectations, progression routes and employment outcomes to reduce early withdrawal from and dissatisfaction with courses.
6. Labour-market intelligence and cohort growth data is utilised to plan academic, vocational and apprenticeship provision more strategically, to ensure capacity keeps pace with demand and competition between age groups does not disadvantage younger learners.
7. Cross-provider enrichment opportunities are broadened to not only create a more competitive offer compared with regional competitors but also raise aspirations.

8. Post-16 providers explore collaborative approaches and strategic networks to address transport barriers, highlighted as a significant influence on post-16 choice including connectivity to all in-Borough post-16 providers and cost, so young people can access efficient, cost effective in-borough provision.
9. Post-16 providers ensure that vocational courses provide coherent pathways to meet industry requirements

DRAFT

Glossary of Terms

EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OYPE	Opportunities for Young People in Employment
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TVCA	Tees Valley Combined Authority