
Report to Children's Scrutiny Board

Children's Services - update on Financial Performance and Improvement Plan

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Purpose of the Report

This is an update to a previous report presented to the Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 23 March 2023 titled 'Children's Services - update on Financial Performance and Getting to Good Programme' on progress in relation to Children's Social Care improvement plans and financial performance.

Executive Summary

Financial position

The month 9 financial position of Children's Social Care is a forecast pressure of £13.348m after the planned use of £0.269m of reserves.

Children's Social Care Demand

Children's Services continues to experience sustained high volumes and complexity of demand demonstrating the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. Service leaders continue to effectively manage high demand, maintaining manageable caseloads in a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Getting to Good (GtG) Programme

The GtG programme continues to drive improvements in the quality of practice in Children's Social Care and Early Help. The programme has expanded its focus to a thematic approach, working with partners to continuously drive improvements in the quality of our work with vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme

The programme is delivering year one of an ambitious five-year programme across three strategic areas: earlier support for families, workforce stability and placement sufficiency. The programme is making progress to deliver targets and has direct oversight from the lead member of children and young people.

Children's Services in Oldham are keeping children and young people safe, seeing more positive outcomes and are in a strong position to further improve the delivery of timely and effective services to support vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Children's Scrutiny Board notes the report and progress to date.

Children's Scrutiny Board

20 March 2024

Children's Services - update on Financial Performance and Getting to Good Plan

1 The current financial position of Children's Social Care

- 1.1 The directorate has benefited from significant additional financial investment over recent years, predominantly due to the recognition of the demand pressures faced by Children's Social Care. The resources have been invested to align budgets to expenditure in demand led services, strengthen the management structure and to expand the cohort of social workers.
- 1.2 The service experienced significant financial pressure throughout 2022/23, the previous report; to the Performance, Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2023 reported the financial position for 2022/23 at month 9 which at that time was highlighting a pressure of £13.171m for Children's Social Care, this increased in the final quarter of 2022/23 and an overspend of £13.806m was reported at the end of the financial year. It was recognised there was a need to invest further to deliver the council's priority of supporting children and young people. Cabinet at its meeting on 12 December 2022 approved the report 'Children's Services Investment Proposals' which outlined an investment of £14.700m for 2023/24. This comprised of £11.800m recurrent funding to stabilise the financial position and one-off funding of £2.900m into several invest to save initiatives. The table below presents the expected financial returns.

Table- Children's Social Care Investment Proposals- December 2022

Investment Plan	2023/24 £k	2024/25 £k	2025/26 £k	2026/27 £k	2027/28 £k	2028/29 £k
Providing The Best Care	583	(548)	(181)	(102)	14	(71)
A Better Place to be a Social Worker	2,941	(1,610)	(1,097)	(730)	(650)	(791)
Supporting Foster Carers	(624)	(742)	(908)	(461)	(362)	(432)
Investment Initiatives - Reserves	(2,900)	2,900	0	0	0	0
Return on Investment	0	0	(2,186)	(1,293)	(998)	(1,294)

2023/24 Financial Position

- 1.3 The council's forecasted revenue position for 2023/24 at 31 December 2023 (month 9) is projecting an adverse variance of £16.642m. This includes a forecasted pressure of £13.348m for Children's Social Care and incorporates the use of reserves totaling £0.269m. The table below presents the financial position, by Directorate for Children's Social Care at month 9.

Table- Summary Financial Position Month 9

Children's Social Care	Revised Budget £k	Forecast £k	Use of Reserves £k	Variance M09 £k
Children in Care	36,066	47,229	0	11,163
Fieldwork & Family Support	12,478	15,369	-88	2,803
Children's Safeguarding	3,256	2,986	-31	-301
Children's Services- Integration	2,639	2,472	-150	-317
Total Children's Social Care	54,439	68,056	-269	13,348

- 1.4 The single largest area of financial pressure is within the placements budget which is forecasting a net adverse variance of £11.634m. Despite the additional investment of £14.700m, there have been further demand pressures in 2023/24 both in the number of children requiring placements and the cost of individual/existing placements. In addition, there have been some delays in the invest to save initiatives which have contributed to the pressure such as the delivery of a children's home. The table below analyses placements by type.

Table- Analysis of Placement Expenditure

Placements at Month 9	Revised budget £k	Forecast £k	Variance £k
Out of Borough Placement- Gross	11,251	20,915	9,664
Continuing Health Care Contribution	-1,233	-2,009	-776
Out of Borough Placement- Net	10,019	18,907	8,888
Semi - Independent Unit	2,395	4,620	2,225
Childrens Independent Foster Agency	1,945	2,395	450
Parent and Baby Assessment Placement	612	822	210
Services - Professional Fees	0	92	92
Staying Put Scheme	201	268	67
Secure - Remand	0	43	43
Direct Payments – PA Support	199	228	28
Assistance To Families Grants	0	19	19
Special Guardianship Payments	1,335	1,350	16
Allowances To Foster Parents	4,992	5,003	11
Shared Lives	0	11	11
Payments To Other Local Authorities	101	110	9
Direct Payments	0	1	1
Residence Orders Payments	28	26	-2
After Care Section 24 Payments	88	67	-20
Adoption Allowances	316	240	-76
Foster Care Placements- Relatives or Friends	1,327	1,245	-83
Expenditure	23,558	35,447	11,888
Contribution From Other Local Authorities	0	-90	-90
Former UASC - Care Leavers	-207	-287	-80
Supported Accommodation Reform	-77	-155	-77
Other Recoveries Of Costs	0	-6	-6
Non-Residential Income	0	-1	-1
Staying Put Grant	-201	-201	0
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)	-636	-636	0
Income	-1,122	-1,376	-255
Total	22,437	34,070	11,634

- 1.5 The largest area of pressure is Out of Borough Placements with a forecast pressure of £9.664. As at 31 December 2023 there were 58 children placed in this category of care at a weekly average cost of £6,500. There are 16 current placements projected to 31 March 2024 with a weekly cost that is higher than the average and the highest cost per week is £22,085, equivalent to £1.148m per annum. The overspend is netted down to £8.888m by

a forecast over-recovery of £0.776m on Continuing Health Care Contributions. The other areas of significant placement related pressures are semi-independence for 16 to 18 year-olds, with a forecast overspend of £2.225m and the use of Independent Fostering Agencies £0.450m.

- 1.6 In addition to increased pressure on placements there continues to be a reliance on agency staff, in social work and related posts, to address demand and help maintain a fully established workforce. The hourly rates paid to agency staff have increased significantly in the last two years. The pressure at month 9 is £2.388m and is the main contributing factor to the overspend of £2.803m within Fieldwork and Family Support. Other contributing pressures are Assistance to Families (£0.203m), No Recourse to Public Funds (£0.124m) and Legal Costs (£0.076m)
- 1.7 It should be noted that whilst there continues to be reliance on agency staff there has been a slight reduction in 2023/24 which is a result of the appointment of permanent staff through an improved 'Choose Oldham' recruitment campaign and the 'Growing Our Own' workforce model with newly qualified social workers progressing into full case-holding social worker roles following their Assisted and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) where they have a protected caseload. The percentage of agency staff in Social Work England Qualified posts has reduced from 44.8% in April 2023 to 38.9% in December 2023
- 1.8 The agency rates have become a particular focus due to increasing costs, both nationally and locally and from 1 November 2023, Oldham signed up to the Greater Manchester (GM) Pledge which means that any new agency workers starting from the 1 November 2023 will be paid at standard rates agreed across GM. The rates apply to social workers, senior social workers, senior practitioners, and team managers but does not apply to existing staff.
- 1.9 Offsetting the overspends are underspends of £0.301m and £0.317m respectively within Children's Safeguarding and Children's Services- Integration; both predominantly as a result of staffing underspends
- 1.10 There continues to be recognition of the ongoing demand pressures in 2023/24 and a further £9.613m will be invested in Children's Social Care in 2024/25 which represents a total investment of £24.313m (£21.413m recurrent) over 2 years. The £9.613m recurrent funding is to further stabilise the financial position. In addition, the children's investment plan is intended to deliver a range of invest to save initiatives in 2024/25. The investment plan is currently being refreshed with finance colleagues, the Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help and the Assistant Director of Children's Services Integration.
- 1.11 Council at its meeting on 28 February 2024 approved budget reductions for Children's Social Care of £3.317m for 2024/25 and a further £1.037m for 2025/26. The deliverability of these reductions will be monitored and reported during the budget monitoring cycle in 2024/25.

2 Children's Social Care and Early Help Demand

- 2.1 Against a backdrop of increased demand nationally post-pandemic and particularly in the Northwest, contextual factors such as poverty, deprivation, the pandemic, and cost of living crisis are having a significant impact on children and young people in Oldham enjoying a happy, healthy, and safe childhood in their families.
- 2.2 There has been a sustained high level of people contacting Children's Social Care and Early Help for advice and support with an associated increase in referrals for statutory social work services. This has led to increases in the numbers of children and young people across all our cohorts (children in need, children subject to child protection plans,

children looked after and care leavers) with 50% additional demand compared to 3 years ago, as demonstrated in the charts below comparing Oldham to our statistical neighbours.



2..3 This high level of volume and complexity of demand, which was unprecedented in 2022, has been sustained throughout 2023 and into 2024 demonstrates the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. In February 2024, there were 2,026 contacts into the MASH with 407 (20.1%) of these converting to referrals for statutory services. Children's Social Care and Early Help are providing support to 4,110 Children and Young People including 1,372 children and young people open to early help, 1,401 children in need, 511 subject to child protection plans, 590 children looked after and 236 care leavers.

3 Getting to Good Programme update

3.1 As part of the delivery of the Getting to Good Strategy, the "Getting to Good" (GtG) programme was launched across Children's Social Care and Early Help services in October 2022 to:

- Enhance the quality of frontline practice to support vulnerable children, young people, and their families.
- Continue to effectively manage continued high levels of demand.

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- Sustain performance of some key indicators.
 - Improve the stability of the workforce.
- 3.2 The programme has focused on four key strategic priorities (the 4p's): Practice, People, Partnerships and Processes, which are underpinned by delivering the seven fundamentals of practice: management oversight and key decision making, reflective supervision, visits to children, assessment, plans, case summaries, and chronologies.
- 3.3 The programme fostered collaboration across services and with partners to collectively drive improvement. A series of focused "sprints," each lasting twelve weeks, were implemented to maintain momentum and ensure targeted, achievable goals. This agile approach has been supported by detailed performance and quality assurance reporting to gauge the effectiveness of interventions and identify areas needing further attention.
- 3.4 To ensure a comprehensive focus on enhancing the quality of frontline practice, a robust governance structure is in place, with management oversight of the programme through the Children's Assurance Board, led by the Managing Director for Children and Young People and Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help to closely monitor progress and impact. Progress and impact have been effectively challenged and supported through regular reporting to the chief executive, the independently chaired Getting to Good Board, the portfolio member and leader of the council.
- 3.5 The Local Government Association (LGA) peer review and North-West Association of Children's Services (NWADCS) peer challenge have recognised the positive impact of this agile programme approach.
- 3.6 **Key achievements in 2023** – improving the lives of children and young people through quality of social work:
- We're managing demand, keeping children and young people safe and seeing more positive outcomes.

Early Help

- Early help positive outcomes have been achieved for 90% of families at case closure.
- Better integrated working relationships with schools.
- Additional capacity across the early help district teams to manage demand and strengthen management oversight of cases. Caseloads have reduced, supporting improvement in timeliness and quality of work with children. Young people and their families.
- Learning from quality assurance activity has informed training in the use of genograms and chronologies. There is evidence of good case recordings and information is child focused. The improved early help performance dashboard gives managers greater oversight of activity for better performance management.

Help and protection

- The Children's Duty and Advice team in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has been remodeled to enable professionals to seek timely advice and guidance regarding children and families they are supporting via the phone instead of through an online referral, which continues to be used out of hours.
- There is a timely response to identified risks and concerns. The timeliness and quality of assessments, visits, direct work, Children in Need (CiN) and Child Protection Plans (CPP) and reviews are progressively improving leading to direct help for families.
- Robust management oversight and multi-agency planning for all high-risk child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and children missing from home/care.

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- During 2022/23, the expanded Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) team have supported 352 survivors of abuse with 378 children to access safe accommodation, either through a refuge, dispersed accommodation, or sanctuary support to remain in their own home.
 - Investment in a perpetrator offer to respond to high levels of domestic abuse incidents.

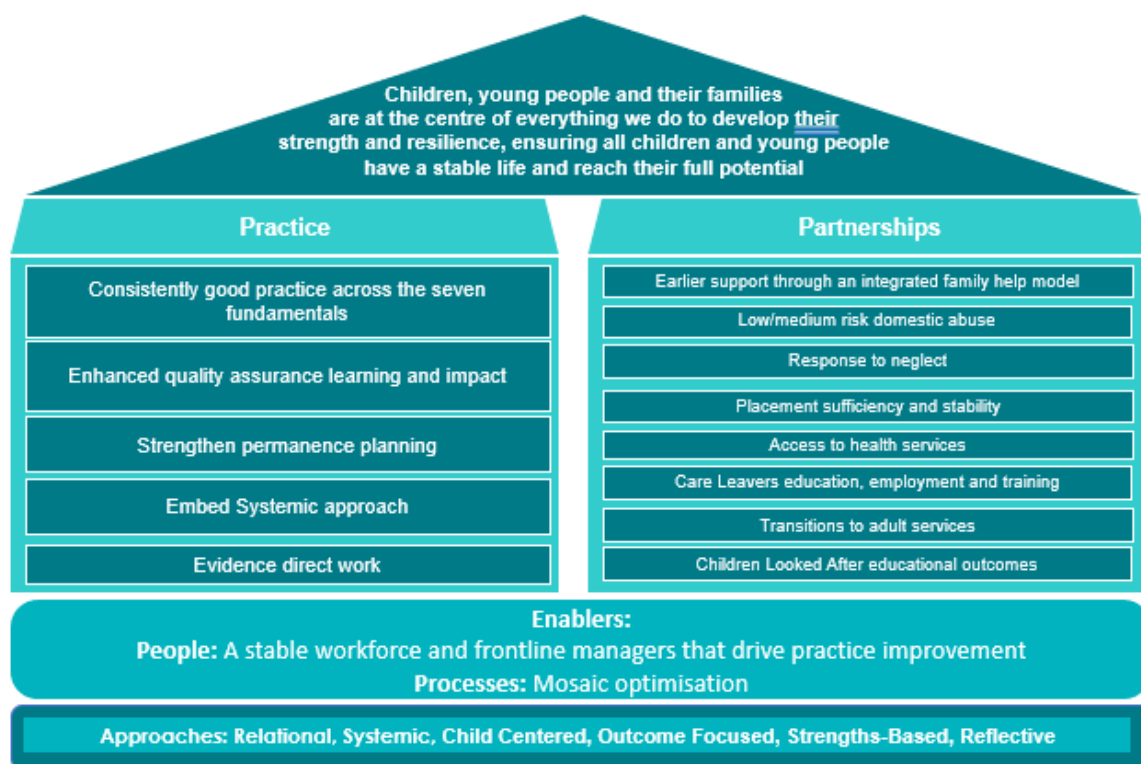
Children in care and care leavers

- More children are achieving permanence outside public care through adoption, Special Guardianship Orders, and reunification with parents.
- There's been a sustained focus on recruitment and retention of foster carers leading to an increase in connected/kinship carers enabling our children and young people to live in familiar communities, remaining in their schools, and maintaining links with family and friends.
- The quality of visits and direct work with children and young people has improved. Care plans are reviewed regularly, child's views are well represented, and most children and young people participate in their care planning.
- Personal Adviser (PAs) have positive, trusting, and stable relationships with care leavers, they know their young people well, are regularly in touch with them and have an excellent understanding of their needs and circumstances.

Workforce

- The early help service has retained a stable and experienced workforce, who have excellent knowledge and understanding of Oldham's communities. There is low staff turnover and no agency workers.
- Social workers have manageable caseloads at an average of 17.
- There is an embedded and consistent focus on the fundamentals of practice for all staff and managers.
- Introduced a monthly induction for all new starters so they have a full understanding of the service area they work in, how they fit into the wider directorate in achieving the council's priorities and have an overview of the issues and challenges faced by children, young people, and families in Oldham.
- There are reduced complaints and increased compliments from children, young people, and families.

3.7 Improvement priorities in 2024 – the GtG programme will continue throughout 2024 following a recent refresh of the strategic priorities and actions in the Getting to Good Strategy. The agile programme approach will continue, focusing on targeted improvement interventions, through systemic, relational, and strengths-based approaches across key themes, to meet the complex needs of children, young people, and their families, which are outlined below:



3.8 Within each thematic area there are high level actions, to be delivered and reviewed quarterly, enabling us to assess and evidence progress and make informed adjustments that will drive further improvements to deliver better outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, and families in Oldham.

4 Children’s Transformation and Sustainability Programme update

4.1 Our ambition is to be the best borough for children and young people and the staff and services that work with them. In December 2022, the council made a £14.7 million investment into vital children’s social care and family support services in the borough.

4.2 The children’s investment plan, as set out in section 1.2 of this report, set the mandate for delivering ambitious plans through a five-year **transformation and financial sustainability programme** across three strategic areas:

- **Earlier support for families:** delivering more support for families, at an earlier stage, without needing intensive support from statutory services through an integrated model of family help
- **Workforce stability:** making Oldham a great place to work with children and young people by recruiting and retaining great social workers and managers through a ‘grow our own’ workforce model.
- **Placement sufficiency:** providing a stable home for every child in our care by increasing the number of council foster carers, residential provision, local externally commissioned placements and securing suitable accommodation for over 18s.

4.3 Workstream progress and impact are outlined below:

Strand 1: Earlier Support for Families

- Beaver family hub has significantly transformed accessibility for information and support for families with the centre seeing twice as many families than the other children's centres combined. Stanley Road family hub will open in March 2024. The remaining 4 family hubs at Spring Meadows, Medlock Vale, Shaw, and Alexandra will be open by the end of April 2024.
- In addition to investment in targeted early help capacity, which is currently supporting over 1,300 children and young people, there has been investment in a range of services to support earlier intervention including:
 - £60k per annum in grants to VCSFE groups.
 - Homestart services.
 - Partnership workers providing intensive support to schools.
 - Parenting team supporting parents at all levels of need.
 - Online parenting advice.
 - Strengthening support through the domestic abuse team by appointing engagement workers to work with medium risk victims of domestic abuse.

Strand 2: Workforce Stability

- As part of the 'Grow our Own' workforce model, we continue to successfully recruit newly qualified social workers (23), apprentices (16), Frontline students (11), Step up to Social Work students (2) and Return to Social Work placements (2) (February 2024).
- A bespoke recruitment campaign 'Choose Oldham' is having a positive impact with increased interest in social work roles through social media campaigns, apprentice drop-in sessions and a Manchester Metropolitan University career fair.
- Between January 2023 and December 2023, 63 social work qualified staff were recruited, 34 of which were external and 28 internal staff who progressed or changed role.
- The service is adhering to the Greater Manchester agency pledge which has been in place from 1 November 2023, recruiting agency social workers via the Reed framework and complying with the agreed rates of pay.
- The agency rate of our full establishment is at 19.7%, and of Social Work England qualified staff is 38.5% at February 2024.

Strand 3: Placement Sufficiency

Foster Care

- Through a bespoke recruitment and retention strategy there are 310 children in care are living with internal foster carers, the highest number for a considerable time following the registration of 25 new foster carers this financial, indicating the positive impact of the investment in increasing foster carer allowances.
- The first specialist foster carer Mockingbird constellation launched on 2 March at Cockfield Farm, that will support five foster carers to improve placement stability. The second constellation will launch in June 2024 in line with the investment plan.
- We have seen an increase in the number of children exiting care through special guardianship orders (6%) and adoption, including foster to adopt (19% compared to 13% in 2022/23).

Residential Placements

- A robust business case has been undertaken and cabinet report submitted in March 2024 to accelerate the invest plan target of delivering one new children's home to three homes by seeking approval to refurbish an existing asset Royton Children's Centre into a 1 x 4 bed children's home for 3 placements by January 2025 and purchase and refurbish 2 x 3 bed homes acquired on the open market for 4 placements by April 2025.
- Launched the Strategic Partnership Provider Pledge in December 2023 that has strengthened partnership working across the local provider market, with shared

responsibility to deliver high quality placements that meet children and young people's needs and to improve placement sufficiency.

- Participation in GM projects i.e. fostering recruitment, House Project and Project Skyline as part of the GM strategic commissioning arrangements for new residential provision, increased foster carers and specialist support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).
- As part of commissioning market management, we are developing lease options for securing local semi-independent placements for 16-18 year olds and securing homes for independent living for care leavers and UASC aged over 18 years with council housing colleagues, local housing providers and private landlords in line with the placement sufficiency strategy.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Service leaders continue to effectively manage high demand for children's services in Oldham, maintaining manageable caseloads to an average of 17, through the recruitment and retention of social workers and managers, to be able to provide timely and intensive support and intervention work with children, young people, and families. There is a stable senior leadership team driving ambitious and innovative transformation within a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
- 5.2 Council-wide strategies such as place-based integration in local communities and an increased focus on early intervention and prevention seeks to address the high levels of demand for statutory services. Additionally, through the delivery of the Getting to Good programme, and Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme, Children's Services in Oldham are keeping children and young people safe, seeing more positive outcomes and are in a strong position to further improve the delivery of timely and effective services to vulnerable children, young people and their families.