

**Present:** Councillor McLaren (in the Chair)  
Councillors Iqbal, Moores and Williamson

Also in Attendance:

Councillor Arooj Shah	Leader of the Council
Councillor Elaine Taylor	Deputy Leader of the Council
Councillor Chris Goodwin	Cabinet Member - Neighbourhoods
Paul Clifford	Director of Economy
Nasir Dad	Director of Environment
Jack Bailey	Executive Policy and Research
	Advisor to the Leader
Alex Glenny	Performance Improvement Advisor
Peter Thompson	Constitutional Services

1        **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ibrahim.

2        **MINUTES**

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Place, Economic Growth and Environment Scrutiny Board, held 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023, be approved as a correct record.

3        **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

4        **URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no urgent items of business for the Scrutiny Board to consider.

5        **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions for this meeting of the Scrutiny Board to consider.

6        **ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK ON GRANT FUNDED PROGRAMMES**

The Scrutiny Board received a report of the Director of Finance which advised Members that the Council had been successful in obtaining capital grant funding from three sources administered by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). These grant funding streams were detailed below:

- i. Future High Street Funds; expected grant related expenditure to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024;
- ii. Town Deals Fund; expected grant related expenditure to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 (the Future High Streets Fund and Town Deals Fund are collectively known as the Towns Fund); and
- iii. Levelling Up Fund; expected grant related expenditure to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025.

In addition, it was expected that there would be more opportunities to bid for a further programme of Levelling Up Funding which had the potential to attract an additional £20m in capital grant funding to the Council. The submitted report outlined the review expected from this Scrutiny Board in respect of the guidance issued by DLUHC on overseeing these grant programmes.

The key points from the guidance in relation to Oldham were:

1. In accordance with the Cabinet Office Government Functional Standards, the Assurance Framework provides for 3 separate and defined levels of assurance referred to as the three lines of defence;
2. The first line of defence should be delivered at an operational management level. This is specified as the Chief Finance Officer. In Oldham this is the Director of Finance. This officer has the responsibility for the delivery of HMG investment, through the agreed projects, with propriety, regularity and value for money;
3. When signing the assurance letter and statement of grant usage the Chief Finance Officer will be required to provide written confirmation that they have actively undertaken all necessary checks to ensure proper administration regarding the funding programme, particularly with regard to financial administration and transparency of governance;
4. The second line of defence will be independent of the first line of defence and will be undertaken by DLUHC. It will require Local Authorities to engage with and provide supporting information in response to further assurance activity undertaken by DLUHC and other Government departments;
5. The third line of defence will be undertaken by an independent audit or an independent body to secure an “objective opinion on the effectiveness of governance, risk management and internal controls”.

The guidance implied that these grant funded projects were reviewed in line with the Council’s arrangements for scrutiny. Should the Council be selected for a more detailed review as set out in the second/ third line of defence then the level of scrutiny undertaken will be reviewed.

For the financial year 2023/24 it was suggested that two reports be submitted by Officers to this Scrutiny Board. This report setting out the Assurance Framework and a further report to the meeting that was scheduled to be held on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024, setting out progress in relation to each of the funding streams/capital expenditure programmes in line with the basis upon which the funding has been approved, i.e. based on forecast outcomes, milestones and financial profiles.

For the municipal year 2024/25 it was recommended that a further 2 reports outlining the progress on the oversight of these

grant programmes are included in the workplan of this Committee.



**Oldham**  
Council

Resolved:

1. That the Scrutiny Board notes its responsibility to undertake scrutiny on the detailed grant programmes.
2. That the Scrutiny Board agrees to the incorporation of a review on progress on the Future High Streets Fund, Town Deals Fund and Levelling Up Fund twice in a municipal year, with the next report to be presented to the Board's meeting, which is scheduled to be held on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

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## **TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION DEEP DIVE**

The Scrutiny Board considered a report of the Director of Economy which advised members that advance notification had been received from the Department of Levelling up, Housing, Communities and Local Government (DLUHC) that Oldham Council's Chief Executive was due to be contacted to ask that the Council participate in a deep dive around its temporary accommodation (TA) use.

The context for this contact and the deep dive had been prompted by concern about the particularly acute pressures on the TA market at present, and the increase in poor quality, poor value-for-money accommodation types; including Bed and Breakfast and 'nightly paid' TA.

The DLUHC was therefore keen to understand more about the drivers of these changes and was intending to carry out 'deep dive' sessions in collaboration with local authorities in a number of areas, which would look at the reason these forms of TA are used and work together to identify some potential solutions.

The Director advised that the Scrutiny Board Members were being asked to note the report, to discuss the challenges with TA at this time, and to reflect on any additional areas which need exploring ahead of the deep dive discussions with DLUHC.

The DLUHC had advised that the details of the Deep Dive were yet to be confirmed, but similar exercises have been carried out around service areas such as the Rough Sleeping Initiative and had taken approximately two days, requiring on-site visits and follow-up work. It was thought that the Deep Dive was likely to involve: - Focus sessions with key staff and residents; Visits to properties to review quality; Analysis of budgets; and Case studies.

The DLUHC had also advised that they were looking to work with six local authorities across England, whom they have selected in regional pairs. In the north of England, this involved Oldham and Manchester. Selection was based on ensuring a diversity of areas across the six, and in areas which were using Bed and Breakfast/Nightly Paid accommodation according to statistical returns made to the DLUHC.

As well as hoping to identify potential solutions, another aim of the Deep Dive was to potentially build a business case around TA. Whilst this was not guaranteed to provide additional funding for Oldham, the initiative could be utilised towards future service change. The DLUHC had noted that they are aware of Oldham being a Levelling Up area and had advised that they would ensure there was no duplication with work around this.

The Scrutiny Board was advised of the potential benefits for the Borough that could be achieved as a result of the authority's participation in the Deep Dive:

- a. DLUHC have advised that, whilst there are no confirmed financial incentives attached, the Deep Dive may be able to build a future business case that can be utilised towards policy and service change.
- b. Oldham Council has the potential to learn best practice from advisors at DLUHC as well as other local authorities from participating in the Deep Dive
- c. Oldham would be contributing to research which will directly influence central government policy
- d. Positive participation may improve the Council's reputation

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the Director of Economy be requested to submit a further report to this Scrutiny Board detailing progress on the implementation of the Deep Dive in due course.
3. That the Scrutiny Board consider holding a workshop session around the subject of Temporary Accommodation when more details become available.

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## **DRAFT ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY**

The Scrutiny Panel received a report and a presentation from the Director of Environment which reminded members that Oldham Council had declared a climate emergency in September 2019 and had committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2025, with boroughwide carbon neutrality by 2030. The council was presently working towards its declared targets as part of the Green New Deal, and this approach ties in with that of Greater Manchester Combined Authority's 5 Year Environmental Plan.

The GMCA plan had six main strands; in Oldham; three of the strands were covered as part of the Green New Deal and, the other three stands, detailed below, were to be covered through the Environment Strategy.

- Climate Adaptation and Resilience
- Production and Consumption of Resources, and,
- The Natural Environment

The Environment Strategy would apply until 2025, after which, the strategy was expected to be reviewed and then synced with that of the Greater Manchester Environment Plan – this would

allow synergy in approach with Oldham's Greater Manchester partners and the Green New Deal, but would also allow Oldham to focus its resource and attention on areas that are relevant and specific to its unique geography, climatic and environmental challenges, especially around adaptation and resilience.



The report also recognised, as part of the three strands above, that there were other key areas and regulatory regimes that would feed into the Environment Strategy and which required to be incorporated into the planning and delivery of the Councils environmental aims and objectives. These were:

- City of Trees – The Council aims to plant an additional 1,000 trees and five hectares of woodland each year from 2024. This will take place in conjunction with City of Trees, which is delivered at a Greater Manchester level. Oldham has taken the lead in identifying sites that are suitable for planting trees and these have been put forward to maximise the number of trees that could be planted in Oldham – both in public areas as well as dedicated greenspaces such as country parks and our larger urban parks/networks
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) – BNG is a new requirement, coming into effect from Autumn 2023 and one that applies to all planning developments. The aim of this is to ensure that all developments through the planning process result in a 'biodiversity net gain' of 10% and this will be delivered at a Greater Manchester level.

Developers cannot be compelled to make the investment in the area where the development is taking place – they can do this at a national level. In order to maximise the gain at a local level, Oldham Council Planning Services were working closely with the Environment Directorate to identify suitable areas and to then raise these at Greater Manchester level to ensure they are considered when developments are taking place.

- Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) – The government introduced legislation under the Environment Act 2021 outlining measures to support the reversal in the decline in nature and biodiversity. This included a new mandatory requirement for local areas in England to develop a spatial strategy for nature recovery, referred to as Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). The government will provide separate guidance to explain what this means in practice and has previously stated that LNRS will not be a barrier to development, nor will it introduce new/different designations.

The regulations state that the responsible authority must take reasonable steps to involve all supporting authorities (for Greater Manchester, this includes the 10 Greater Manchester Combined Authorities metropolitan district councils, Natural England and Peak District National Park Authority). This work will be delivered at a Greater

Manchester level but would be delivered locally through planning policy and will complement the councils overall aim to increase green space, trees coverage and biodiversity.

The purpose of presenting this draft Environmental Strategy to this Scrutiny Board meeting was to gain feedback and consideration for the approach being proposed with key elements of the Draft Environment Strategy outlined in the Summary section.

Resolved:

1. That the Scrutiny Board supports the aims and aspirations of the Draft Environment Strategy for the Borough and endorses actions already taken.
2. That the Director of Environment be requested to submit a further report to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Board updating members on progress being made.

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## **CREMATORY AND CEMETERIES**

The Scrutiny Board received a report of the Director of Environment which informed members of the opportunities and current/future challenges that exist within the cemetery service that is within the Council's Environment Directorate. The report outlined the current approach to addressing these challenges, as well as the future plans being devised while continuing to provide a high level of service to residents during, what is often, a stressful and difficult time in their lives.

The report outlined the Service's approach towards ensuring the following:

- a. Future burial capacity that meets all residents needs
- b. Ensuring a consistent approach to memorials and headstones at all graveyards
- c. Tackling the risk of flooding at cemeteries
- d. Ensuring the service meets the needs of all the residents in terms of access/out of hours burials
- e. Ensure that upgrades of cremators are made in a timely manner for continued compliance with legal requirements

The meeting was informed that Oldham Council manages seven cemeteries and one crematorium, which is situated with Hollinwood Cemetery and, in all, serves a population of approximately 240,000. During 2022, 470 full interments, 151 cremated remains interments and 1,726 cremations were carried out. The cemetery service provides burials out of normal working hours, covering weekends, Bank Holidays, and evenings (until dusk). During 2022/23, 33 evening and 33 weekend/bank holiday burials took place.

In terms of burial capacity there was currently 39 years of remaining burial capacity borough wide, but officers were aware that work had to be undertaken to ensure future capacity. Chadderton Cemetery had available land that could be developed, potentially adding a further 20 years of burial space. In addition, the Service was working with the Council's Planning



Services to identify other sites that could be developed to provide future burial capacity. It was noted that it was important to identify these sites as part of the Local Plan. Once suitable sites could be identified, there would be a requirement to undertake initial design and planning work to enable this land to be utilised as a burial site. The same approach will be undertaken at other sites boroughwide where additional land has been identified but requires development and assessment before use. The Service would ensure that sites would be brought into use in a timely manner so that there is capacity moving forward.

All Memorial placements and Headstones had to have the prior agreement of the Council and there was a criterion that must be met – this related to the size/dimension/materials and fixing methods of the stonework and any planting on graves. However, there were instances in which permitted sizes have been exceeded. This has resulted in access problems to ensure maintenance and has, on occasion, also prevented visitors to adjacent graves from being able to access the area.

The issue of flooding was also a national problem, largely caused by standing water across all areas after periods of heavy rain. This was also an issue in some of the Borough's cemeteries where, after prolonged or heavy rain, there would be some standing water over graves. The water does dissipate relatively quickly but this issue has been raised more frequently in recent years.

The meeting was advised that the Service provides 'out of hours' access for burials, which was available for all residents of Oldham. However, it was mainly used by the Muslim community given their religious requirement to bury the deceased as soon as practically and legally possible. As a result, the Service works closely with Muslim Funeral Services in Oldham to ensure a timely and suitable provision. Where out of hours access is needed (evenings, weekends and bank holidays), this did not carry an extra charge to cover the costs of service provision outside of normal working hours. The 'out of hours' fees charged by Oldham were commensurate with the works completed and comparable regionally. Based on current figures, Oldham was the fourth cheapest, with six other authorities in Greater Manchester charging more for their 'out of hours' access.

The Crematorium's three cremators were nearing the end of life and due to be replaced within the next 2-5 years. This was to ensure they continued to operate efficiently and to comply with legislative requirements for mercury abatement. A replacement programme would have to be carefully managed to ensure service provision and capacity, both to meet resident and budget needs. A separate report outlining the course of action as well as timelines for replacement was currently being produced and would go through necessary consultation before procurement/replacement could commence.

Resolved:

1. The Scrutiny Board notes the main areas of concern around burial capacity, identified in the report and supports the proposed course of action, to remedy the matters concerned.
2. The Scrutiny Board recommends that the Service develops a more consistent approach towards the development of a policy for memorials and headstones.
3. The Board notes the proposed compliance led approach towards memorial stones.
4. The Board notes the programme of works and interventions with regards to flooding, 'out of hours' access/fees and the cremator replacement programme.

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### **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered its Work Programme for 2023/24.

Resolved:

That the Place, Economic Growth and Environment Scrutiny Board's Work Programme 2023/24, be noted.

The meeting started at 6.00pm and ended at 8.10pm