

Corporate Peer Challenge

Oldham Council

21st – 24th January 2020

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Oldham is a creative, forward thinking post-industrial borough with a real urban and rural mix. Parts of the borough are located within 5 miles of Manchester City Centre, with a quarter of the borough located within the Peak District National Park. Oldham is home to 235,000 residents – a relatively young population which is forecast to grow significantly to 255,000 by 2041. The population of Oldham is very diverse, with over 120 languages spoken and a Black and Minority Ethnic population, which is twice the size of the North West average.

For a number of years, Oldham Council has been known regionally and on some national platforms for prioritising and advancing co-operative ways of working. More recently, the Council has developed this into a broader 'Oldham Model'. This model presents a high-level vision for Oldham which is endorsed by the wider public service 'system' in Oldham and includes visions for Thriving Communities, Co-operative Services and an Inclusive Economy.

Within this framework officers are empowered to innovate and have supportive working relationships with members, partners and with communities. The energy this has created has led to new ways of working and innovative solutions. Some of which have been led by the Council, some of which the Council has supported partners and the community to lead. Examples of this include the Hilltop GP Practice - which is a co-operative GP Practice that has grown out of the community, and an emerging 'Northern Roots' eco-park.

In leading this strategic agenda, the Leader and Chief Executive are highly respected by colleagues at the Council, by partners in Oldham and in Greater Manchester for their open, supportive and engaging approach as well as their strong working relationship. The Organisation's culture is positive and shares the joint ambition as set out by the Leader and Chief Executive for the Town. Since becoming Leader in May 2018, the Leader of the Council has prioritised Oldham being a 'great place to live'. This has resulted in the Council committing to an existing initiative of a £306m investment of 'Creating a Better Place' which will see investment in jobs, apprenticeships, homes and leisure an extra £37m to increasing the capacity of 'good' and 'outstanding' schools, increasing spending on road improvements by £19m and a £0.6m increase in street cleansing capacity.

The Council's prioritisation of 'a great place to live' fits with the high level 'Oldham Model' as set out in the partnership's Oldham Plan (2017 – 2022). In addition to this, the Council is committed to delivering a wider range of projects and initiatives across a number of other priority areas. Meaning that members and officers will often speak of several different priorities. This energy appears to be born out of a strong sense of ambition for Oldham, an openness to the 'art of the possible' and an awareness of the opportunities presented by being a member of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

The scale of Oldham's ambition is a strength, although this also presents a challenge.

Delivering on this scale of ambition will now require a focus both on a smaller set of clearly defined political priorities, as well as the key organisational challenges. Examples of the latter include 'getting to good' in Children's Services following an OFSTED 'Requires Improvement' outcome in 2019, as well as identifying and implementing robust savings proposals which mitigate the reliance on reserves over the period of the Medium Term Financial Plan and deliver

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a more resilient financial position. It might also include delivering against some of the local issues which do not have simple solutions – such as in the local private rented housing sector.

This must not dampen but harness the ambition and energy which is clearly evident in Oldham, as this is one of the borough's most important assets. It is equally not about restricting innovation and empowerment from happening more broadly. It is about having a relentless shared focus when required, to ensure delivery of the key corporate priorities.

Communicating this focus clearly internally and externally – both with partners in Oldham and in Greater Manchester will bring real benefits. Partners in Oldham and in Greater Manchester respect the Council as a place leader and are supportive of what the Council is trying to achieve for the place. They are open to what the Council may ask of them in delivering this vision. This is a great opportunity to draw in additional, meaningful capacity and resource.

Whilst the Council has a particularly high number of smaller businesses in Oldham with few larger businesses, engaging with private partners in more depth and building those relationships will also help the Council to further its ambitions to create an inclusive economy and thriving communities.

To help inform this relentless focus on those key priorities, the Council would benefit from refreshing its Performance Management Framework. This will help ensure that there is consistent performance and risk ownership which is both supported and challenged with timely and suitably informed oversight. The targets, milestones and measures this leads to should continue to reflect this ambition, whilst being deliverable. This was acknowledged by the Council during the course of the peer challenge.

Aligning the emerging Transformation Plan and the work of the 'Strategic Design Authority' to this more focussed set of priorities and refreshed corporate performance framework will help the Council to clearly identify the capacity required to deliver against each priority. As well as identify a pipeline of future projects/efficiency savings to stop the Council from continuing to rely on the use of reserves.

Ensuring all of the necessary challenge mechanisms available to the Council are suitably deployed against the key priorities will help the Council in sustainably delivering the vision. This would include considering the information available to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to support their role.

The Council has a highly respected finance function, which *"has kept the Council safe"* despite a £208m funding reduction since 2008. The function is well respected for its technical expertise and has supported councils elsewhere across Greater Manchester over a number of years. As the budget for 2021/22 is developed, the Council needs to identify and agree a deliverable and ongoing savings proposals that cover the entirety of its MTFs up to 2024/25. The Transformation Plan the Council has will need to then deliver these savings at pace to stop the reliance on balancing the budget by one-off means. Marrying collective responsibility with specific accountabilities will be required to achieve this.

One part of the Transformation Plan is the recently developed 'Creating a Better Place' vision for economic growth and regeneration. This builds on the recent work to develop a new vision

for the town centre and the positive steps the Council took prior to this to improve the leisure offer within the town centre. Most notably this included transforming the old Town Hall into a distinctive £37m cinema and leisure complex. This has helped the local evening economy and will have helped retail performance in the town centre to remain relatively stable, at a time whilst most other similar town centres have struggled. This new vision for the place also has the potential to support the Council's financial sustainability in the medium to longer term, as well as create further platforms for the ongoing development of a 'Team Oldham' way of working across the local public service system.

It is clear in Oldham that the greatest asset the Council has is the pride, energy, connection and commitment towards making Oldham a 'great place to live'. This is evident amongst members, officers, partners and in the community. Focus, supportive challenge and building further platforms for it will help Team Oldham greatly over coming years.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- 1) **Focus the various priorities into a clear, achievable singular corporate set as part of the forthcoming Team Oldham Plan.** This should include both political and high-risk areas which may affect sustainability if not addressed. Communicate these consistently and clearly inside and outside Team Oldham. Use these to then shape the other key planning documents such as the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Transformation Plan.
- 2) **Once done, review the levels of oversight and assurance against this more focussed set of priorities to ensure appropriate support and challenge is in place, which is suitably informed.** This will include the approach to performance management and the roles and responsibilities each will play in the Performance Management Framework to ensure delivery is kept on track and any issues are highlighted early.
- 3) **Review the additional benefits that Overview and Scrutiny can bring in helping to shape and challenge the delivery of the key priorities for the Council and the borough.** This may include the areas scrutiny focusses on as well as the means in which Overview and Scrutiny is conducted.
- 4) **Continue to embed the Strategic Design Authority approach at pace so that it can drive the delivery of transformation and realisation of savings.** This will mean clear terms of reference, effective phasing and prioritisation, robust governance, effective communications and appropriate member engagement.
- 5) **Agree a programme of ongoing savings which can be delivered at pace to stop the reliance on one off funding and reserves.** This will require a strategic approach

which builds on – although which is different to - the strengths in operational financial management.

- 6) **Progress the ‘Creating a Better Place’ vision and strategic framework given the significant potential benefits for the borough, as well the medium – longer term financial sustainability of the Council.** Ensuring the Council has the right capacity and connections to deliver on this robustly and at pace will be crucial, given the scale of ambition involved.
- 7) **Develop a specific set of phased asks from partners both inside Oldham and across Greater Manchester which will help you to deliver the vision for Oldham.** This includes the Greater Manchester Combined Authority as well as the Oldham Leadership Board.
- 8) **Further develop relationships with partners in the private sector.** This is both as a means to engage and influence, as well as a way of further embedding the Council’s vision for an inclusive economy and thriving communities.
- 9) **Work with partners in the VCFSE to formalise a framework setting out how the Council works with the sector,** building on the good practice already being seen.
- 10) **Consider holistically how the energy, commitment and creativity of the workforce across Team Oldham can be optimised.** Examples of this include the alignment of resources to the new corporate priorities, embedding the new workforce strategy, the building of digital approaches to help officers to work more efficiently or the further benefits that can be brought from systematically capitalising on the Council’s investments in volunteering and local employment.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Oldham Council were:

- **Rob Walsh** (CEX of NE Lincs Council and NE East Lincs CCG)
- **Cllr Clare Coghill** (Leader – London Borough of Waltham Forest)
- **Cllr Richard Kemp** (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group - Liverpool City Council)
- **Jackie Yates** (Executive Director of Resources – Reading Borough Council)
- **Bren McInerney** (Community Volunteer)
- **Sarah Reed** (Strategic Director for People, Communications and Partnerships – Sunderland City Council)
- Shadow: **Nick Searle** (Local Authority Chief Executive Relationships Lead - MHCLG)
- LGA peer challenge manager: **Dan Archer** (LGA Programme Manager)

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, the Council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the approach to Public Sector Reform.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Oldham Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 130 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 300 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 8 weeks in Oldham.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (21st – 24th January 2020). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Oldham is a Council that has a deep understanding of the needs of its residents as well as the challenges that many people face. The Council prides itself on working closely with communities as a '*Council of Oldham, not in Oldham*'. This can be seen by the way in which the Council goes beyond what many other councils do to understand local communities, examples of which are contained in this section.

Locality neighbourhood working has been in place in Oldham since 2009. The current arrangements include seven district footprints which are supported by six district teams. Each district has a nominated member who acts as a 'District Lead' and works closely with all members in the area to support them in their roles. This model aims to ensure a strong connection with local communities, with each district setting its own priorities and taking decisions at a local level. Members can champion the needs of their district from this – ensuring parallels between district and corporate priorities. In a number of other councils nationally, area based working has been stripped back significantly in recent years, largely as a result of response to budget pressures. It is a clear demonstration of the Council's commitment to working with the community that this remains in place in Oldham.

This experience of area based working has provided a strong foundation for the integration of Health and Social Care in Oldham under the banner of Oldham Cares. In doing so, the Council is changing from seven area footprints to five. This is to match the requirement for health and social care area based working at a population range typically between 30,000 – 55,000. This is the scale which is expected to enable more services to be provided at a local level whilst realising the benefits and economies of scale.

The next stage of this approach will mean identifying which of the other services delivered by Team Oldham would be better delivered at a local level, using these footprints and moving more of those services down to this level. These steps will require great care to ensure service delivery at a local level meets the needs of all local communities as well as the expectations of existing community capacity. During this ongoing transformation, the geography of different area based working arrangements is complex. Ensuring members, officers and partners are clear on the different area boundaries as this evolves into a simpler, consistent structure will be important.

In supporting the vision for 'Thriving Communities', the Council has developed a 'Thriving Communities Index' which provides rich granular level detail on local communities which has further potential to support further targeted, place based working across the system. This is an asset not only for the Council but to partners including the VCFSE sector. There is further potential here in how the Council is able to more consistently and proactively use this level of detail to inform policy development – be that borough-wide or locally, within the Council or across the wider public service system.

The Council has a strong and close working relationship with the VCFSE association 'Action Together' as well as the other VCFSE organisations in Oldham. The maturity of these relationships has led to the Council developing an approach to Social Prescribing which is particularly advanced. This has included the design of a Social Prescribing Service delivered by a Social Prescribing Partnership model (including partners MIND, Action Together, Positive Steps and Age UK). This was made possible through the recent awarding of a three year contract across Oldham Cares. This puts real resource behind an ethos of empowering the VCFSE sector to take on more of the 'design' role, rather than being pinned down to the 'deliver' role by a more discrete commissioning function (as is often the case elsewhere). With these mature, open and close working relationships there are further opportunities. A forward looking framework for how the Council and VCFSE wish to engage – as well as how this shared approach can continue to evolve - will help with this. This might include how Team Oldham will work with the VCFSE sector to draw in investment either from internal or external sources. This might also include the steps the Council is taking to support the sector through its social value procurement policy, use of physical assets and evolving approach to design and delivery.

In speaking to a number of local residents during the course of the peer challenge, issues around housing were raised. This included the impact of poor landlords in the private rented sector, temporary accommodation, the number of empty homes in some areas and how this could affect a sense of community and civic contribution. The Council are clearly aware of these issues and the complexities and demands involved in resolving them. More broadly, a new Housing Strategy has been set out in recent months which is aspirational. The Council will want to ensure that it is clear on how this can be delivered which will require suitably robust plans with timely milestones.

During the course of the peer challenge, the team were fortunate to meet with the Oldham Youth Council who were heralded as *"one of the best youth council's in the country"* and had in recent months managed to achieve the Queen's Voluntary Service Award. The group are proud of Oldham and have managed to harness this enthusiasm to affect significant changes of policy, some of which have then been replicated across Greater Manchester. Examples include the offer of free bus travel for young people and free prescriptions for care leavers. The Council clearly listen to the Youth Council and have a positive relationship. In 2018, the Council launched a 'Voice of the Child' statement, to improve the way in which the Council listens to and acts upon the voice of local young people. How the Youth Council is used across the public service system in Oldham to inform policy direction presents a further opportunity – particularly for vulnerable groups.

Everyone the team met in Oldham demonstrated pride and ambition for Oldham and showed a commitment in different ways to making Oldham 'a great place to live'. If the Council is able to communicate a clear singular set of priorities for making this happen, there is further willing capacity available in the community, VCFSE sector, with partners (e.g. Regenda) and at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. These priorities will need to reflect the political priorities, the key essential service and system sustainability priorities (e.g. finance). The associated implementation plan should ensure parity of

attention and capacity across the significant people and place based ambitions to avoid the risk of drift and none delivery. This can then lead to specific asks of partners which they are open to.

Oldham is home to around 7,295 businesses which employ roughly 90,000 people. This business base is made up primarily of micro, small and medium sized enterprises with relatively few larger businesses compared to similar areas elsewhere. How the Council is able to develop the role that the local private sector plays in achieving the ambitions for Oldham is a particular area where additional capacity and opportunities may lie. One example of this is in the potential benefits the private sector could bring to growing an inclusive economy and thriving communities (such as through the recognition of corporate social responsibility and use of behavioural insights). Growing this support and channelling this capacity will require developing the breadth and depth of these relationships further.

Officers met by the peer team understood the long-standing ethos for co-operative ways of working. Officers and partners did not always see as consistently where this was happening in some services. Hence there is an opportunity of continuing to embed the model in practical terms at service level. Having a communications approach which spotlights, recognises and encourages these behaviours has an important role to play here.

The Council has clearly worked to prioritise the employment of local residents and monitors this regularly as part of the performance reports to Senior Management Team and Cabinet. In addition to this however, the Council understands the distribution of its workforce at a ward level and is working with partners to undertake a similar assessment. This includes the development of targeted activity to help recruit a balanced workforce which is fully representative of all communities in Oldham. This is backed by emerging plans to make this happen as well as ambitions for how the wider Team Oldham could follow this lead. This is above and beyond what most other councils are doing nationally and represents a real long-term commitment to an inclusive economy. There is also potential in how this could be used to help the Council to understand local communities. Identifying ways of systematically sharing the insights the Council workforce gets from being a part of local communities is one such opportunity. Equally how the workforce might be able to communicate key Council messages back out into their communities is another. Lastly, how this can be used to further help residents navigate the public service / community offer is also worth exploring. If this is meaningfully achieved, this could potentially represent a sector leading approach to local employment and community engagement.

4.2 Leadership of Place

Partners in Oldham and in Greater Manchester recognise Oldham Council as a strong and authentic place leader. Close, open collaboration is consistently seen with examples of this being the Council's approach to food poverty, fuel poverty and homelessness.

The Council works closely with communities and community groups to help them as community leaders which is helping to transform areas for the better. Across the borough, examples of this include the impact of the Green Dividend, Alley Parties and a supportive approach to staff volunteering. Further still the Council has supported others to drive innovation which is based on civic contribution. An example of this is the focussed care model in Fitton Hill and Hollinwood. This model sees GP practices being used to provide social and clinical outreach to the community, drawing on community empowerment and leadership to do so. This is now being rolled out in other GPs across Oldham. The Council can be proud of the innovation shown here which is a great example of integrated health working that many others can learn from.

The strategic partnership has a long-established forum named the Oldham Leadership Board which is chaired by the Leader of the Council and has responsibility for driving forward the Oldham Model. The Oldham Leadership Board benefits from strong support from a number of partners including the VCFSE leaders and business leaders, as well as the other public sector organisations working in Oldham. At this level there is a real buy in to the vision for Oldham and a willingness to work together. This could be further advanced by streamlining partnership structures so that there is more clarity amongst partners on structures as well as the expectations of each other.

In Greater Manchester, the Council is seen as leading the way in a number of ways. An example of this includes the approach to improving early years outcomes in Oldham. The percentage of 5-year-old children achieving a 'good level of development' in Oldham last year improved by 4 percentage compared to an increase of 0.3 percentage points nationally. The Council's reputation for 'a bold, honest and brave approach' to public service reform is also regarded highly across Greater Manchester. Senior Elected Members and officers are seen as being a strong place leader at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and have "*brought Oldham to the fore*".

The Council has developed exciting proposals for the place – including plans for 'Northern Roots' which represents the transformation of an ageing depot into a 160-acre eco-park which utilises the latest green technologies whilst also encouraging food growing and community enterprise. Oldham is one of the 100 places being supported by the Government to develop a Town Deal and the Council has also brought forward the 'Creating a Better Place' framework which sets out a £306m vision for economic growth and regeneration across Oldham. For the latter it is important that the Council is able to ensure it has the necessary capacity, capability and exposure required to deliver on this at pace. Further developing the relationships with partners in the private sector is crucial in making this the start of further ongoing success in this field. Getting to a position where there is a more clearly and consistently communicated prospectus for growth – which identifies the specifically targeted growth sectors – will help. This can then be further supplemented with a clear pipeline of projects which will help to deliver on this. This will help in moving this vision along at pace and help the Council to be ready to capitalise on opportunities quickly as they present themselves.

In recent years the Council had significant success in transforming the old Town Hall into a cinema and leisure complex, which has had a considerable impact on the evening economy. Residents are proud of the transformation this has represented and the

distinctive character it brings to the town centre. The job is never finished however, given the pressures on town centres in most parts of the country. Developing and establishing new relationships with the private sector as well as capitalising on the opportunities presented by the GMCA can help significantly with this. The GMCA are open to hearing a clear set of asks which fit with this vision for 'Creating a Better Place'.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Relationships between members and officers in Oldham are good. The distinctive roles are clear and respected with officers and members supportive of each other. Officers speak positively of the role that members play in driving forward an ambitious programme. The Leader and Chief Executive are highly respected within the Council and are seen as approachable, open and supportive.

Relationships between members have also improved in recent years and are now stable. At an officer level, the Council operates a Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) and a Joint Leadership Team (JLT) to reflect the work of the Council as well as the work across the Council and Clinical Commissioning Group. This is an arrangement which has been in place since the Chief Executive became the Accountable Officer for the CCG in May 2018.

There are strong and credible leaders at both SLT and JLT who are evidently open to development and learning. An example of this being the take-up of coaching both collectively and individually. To help the Council to deliver on its corporate priorities, there is an opportunity to consider the collective role that these groups should play in supporting and challenging each other in delivery of the collectively owned corporate priorities. This will help aid oversight and assurance – as well as help manage performance and risks. This is particularly the case for high profile items also such as transformation, regeneration, children's services, adult social care and resources. Providing the SLT and JLT – as well as the Leader and Chief Executive - with timely and comprehensive performance reporting will help ensure all of the corporate priorities are delivered on track.

In regard to the integration of health and social care, as the Council looks to grow the pooled budget, there is an opportunity to further streamline governance arrangements to remove duplication and speed up decision making. This will make decision making more agile and empowered – further empowering the Team Oldham ethos and releasing further capacity. More widely the Oldham system (five organisations) have a complex network of boards, committees and companies which might also be rationalised to clarify the roles and relationships between these bodies which can potentially further speed up decision making and reduce duplication.

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny function is made up of an Overview and Scrutiny Board, a Performance and Value for Money Select Committee and a Health Scrutiny Committee. Issues are considered by a committee on a six-weekly cycle. There is an opportunity to consider the role that Scrutiny could play in bringing the necessary challenge and advice to decision making. This includes how Scrutiny aligns to the most

crucial priorities and challenges (such as transformation, regeneration, children's services, adult social care and resources). These are important checks and balances in delivering an ambitious programme. In addition to this, there is capacity for support and challenge within the Trade Unions who have welcomed in particular the open and engaging approach taken on new proposals in Adult Social Care recently.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

Since 2009/10, the Council has had to make budget reductions of £208m which has meant year-on-year service reductions during a period with substation increases in service pressures. The requirement to balance the budget each year has resulted in significant budget proposals being agreed and implemented over a number of years.

The Council's 2019/20 revenue budget was £224.112m. This budget was balanced through the use of £7.829m of budget reductions, £8.818m use of corporate and specific reserves, £3m of capital receipts to support spending on transformational projects and £2.269m surplus from the Collection Fund. This represents a significant draw on one off monies (including reserves).

At the time of peer challenge, General Fund Balances were estimated at £14.8m with earmarked reserves estimated at £93.6m. Whilst these levels of reserves appear relatively adequate as they currently stand, they are one-off in nature and cannot be used indefinitely. Whilst the Council was forecasting an adverse variance of £1.367m against the 2019/20 budget at the time of the peer challenge, it was expected that a balanced position would be achieved by financial year end.

The Council was in the process of updating its Medium Term Financial Strategy to cover the period 2020/21 to 2024/25 during the course of the peer challenge. This document anticipated a budget reduction requirement of £19.740m for 2020/21. A total of seven budget reduction proposals had been put forward for 2020/21 which totalled £3.011m. This left a remaining budget requirement of £16.729m for 2020/21 which would largely be addressed by the use of one-off funding opportunities including corporate reserves and funding from the business rate retention pilot. These pressures however then return meaning - in the absence of any identified savings - a potential further draw on reserves of £23.366m in 2021/22. Whilst a reducing figure, the current MTFs assumes year on year calls on reserves until 2023/24 which allows time for the delivery of the transformation programme and other organisational changes to embed.

The Council clearly has strengths in operational financial management and technical accounting. The finance function has and continues to be held in high regard within the Council, with the External Auditor and with other councils across Greater Manchester who have turned to Oldham for support and guidance when closing down accounts and dealing with technical issues.

The relationship with the External Auditor is open and proactive, with the Council being described as *"the model client"*. This is important given some of the technical complexities and appetite for innovation in Oldham. It will also be important as the

Council embarks on an ambitious £306m capital programme. The 'Creating a Better Place' programme is expected to deliver a financial return to the Council which will assist with net revenue expenditure in the medium term. It is important that this is delivered at pace and in doing so, the Council will need to assure itself that it has a suitable amount of capacity to deliver this programme, given that it is *"on a scale few at the Council have worked with before"*.

However, in light of the underlying budget pressures, reducing reserves and ambition of the Council, now is the time to recalibrate the budget against a clear set of political priorities over the medium term and identify and agree the ongoing savings required to close the budget gap on a sustainable long term basis. This process can also be used to help ensure that capacity to deliver is aligned to this set of corporately owned priorities. Doing this will require a strategic financial and corporate approach, with ownership and engagement from across the organisation and CCG (where relevant).

The Transformation Programme encompasses a wide ranging set of change projects and programmes. This is overseen by a Strategic Design Authority which is chaired by the Chief Executive/Accountable Officer. This must act as *"the engine"* for the delivery of both the Council's transformation ambitions as well as the realisation of the significant, ongoing savings required. This board is supported by a newly created Design and Assurance Service which brings together the functions required to deliver change programmes and is supplemented by a dedicated Transformation Reserve to support the commissioning of additional expertise and capacity as required. Much of the programme is still in development and it is expected that most of the programme will begin delivery by Spring 2020.

The next 12 – 24 months will be crucial to the Council and CCG. Put simply *"...the Transformation Programme has to deliver. We can't afford to let that slip."*

To help ensure the scale of transformation and associated savings realisation are achieved, the Council should develop this work at pace, ensuring:

- Clear terms of reference are in place.
- Effective phasing and prioritisation of work is done which takes into account programme management factors such as capacity, lag and interdependencies.
- Robust governance arrangements are in place across all of the transformation schemes to ensure accountability for delivery at pace as well as mutual sharing of risks and issues.
- Effective, proactive communications both internally and externally.
- Clear engagement with and oversight by elected members.

As the Council continues to transform, there may be a requirement to review the Unity Partnership business model to ensure it remains fit for purpose and is relevant to the demands of the transforming public service system in Oldham. This might include consideration of whether it is adding additional costs or barriers which would not be necessary under an alternative approach, or whether it still fits with the changing requirements of the customer base within Team Oldham. Equally, there may be further opportunities both for the Unity Partnership and/or the Council in shared service

arrangements with some or all of its partners in Greater Manchester. There are already examples in place which could be built on. Examples of this include a joint website to advertise jobs (www.greaterjobs.com), a joint Occupational Health Offer and a number of training and development initiatives.

Delivery of the Council's aspirations are complex and critical. Having recently agreed a new Risk Management Framework it is vital that all risks are now identified and appropriately owned at the right level with effective mitigations put in place. Supportive challenge will be required against known risks to ensure these have been appropriately identified with effective mitigations. For the key corporate risks, effective oversight will be required which engages senior leaders collectively.

The Council has demonstrated its commitment to Team Oldham and the integration of public services with the steps it has taken in recent months to provide one-off financial support to the CCG through an increase to the pooled budget. There are clearly underlying financial issues at the CCG which will need to be addressed and the Council is developing a commission/procurement delivery plan which will include savings targets linked to both the Council and CCG medium term financial plans which will need to be proactively managed.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The overriding memory of Oldham for the peer team is the sense of pride, ambition, commitment and dedication to Oldham. This was demonstrated consistently by those the team met with. Officers at the Council enjoy being trusted to lead and innovate. Many officers the team spoke with reported working at the Council for a long period or having actively sought out a return to the Council following a period elsewhere.

The Council is genuinely mindful of the wellbeing of its staff. A number of programmes have been put in place which demonstrates this. The Council's health and wellbeing approach - Fit for Oldham was launched by the Chief Executive and a Mental Health Ambassador scheme has also been established. The Council has also chosen to train 72 'Mental Health First Aiders' – realising parity with the ratio required for other First Aid staff.

Whilst remaining below the Greater Manchester average, sickness absence at the Council reached its highest level in six years in September 2019, with staff turnover also increasing in the last year. This was highlighted in a quarterly performance report to Cabinet and the Council has committed to a 'deep dive' review of this which will report back in February 2020.

Council performance is currently monitored via a monthly report which is submitted to SLT and the political leadership. This includes performance in relation to HR, finance as well as a selection of corporate measures. In addition, a quarterly report is shared with SLT, Leadership, Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny which is based upon progress against the key priorities within directorate business plans. The Council is currently developing a new Team Oldham Plan for 2020 – 2023 which is due to be

agreed by Council in May 2020. If this includes a clear set of corporate priorities, it is an opportune time for the Council to refresh its Performance Management Framework. This can help ensure there is clear ownership of performance across the organisation, which allows for considered challenge as well as suitable levels of stretch. It can also be used to help ensure suitable corporate oversight of a single set of key corporate priorities.

As the transformation programme progresses the Council should continue to embed its new workforce development strategy and the necessary organisational design. The Council has already taken the step of aligning HR/OD functions with the CCG and a workforce development strategy is in development which is due to be launched in April 2020. As the Council continues to progress integration, increased area based delivery and the continued embedding of the Oldham Model, this strategy will help guide the development of a future workforce which meets these evolving expectations.

The positive approach the Council takes to encouraging staff to use three days of work time to volunteer locally demonstrates the Council's commitment to the VCFSE sector and a 'Team Oldham' way of working. This commitment then has the potential to pay off multiple times over. In the time staff then choose to give in addition outside of their working hours, in the way in which this can help to further socially normalise volunteering and civic contribution for those staff living in local communities, as well as the value of the insights staff bring back from these experiences. Systemically capturing and sharing this could help to further inform the approach to public service delivery across Team Oldham.

The Council has the opportunity to harness more of the energy from its workforce by reviewing the processes and platforms used to 'do the day job'. Just one example of this could be the use of digital platforms and mobile working. Models of technology enabled 'mobile' social work are becoming increasingly common across many councils, enabling social workers to spend more time away from the desk and less time travelling, spending less time filling out forms and more time with families. This equally has benefits for the Council's carbon reduction ambitions.

The Council has recently appointed a new Managing Director of Children's Services (DCS) who had been in post for six weeks at the time of the peer challenge. This is a permanent appointment following a period of interim arrangements within children's services. The new Director is keen to put in place the correct structure and appoint to those posts on a permanent basis which has already commenced, to bring capacity, stability, improvement and efficiencies to this service area. As part of a recent OFSTED and CQC SEND re-visit in September 2019, the Council was able to demonstrate a strong self-awareness and sufficient progress in three out of the five significant weaknesses identified in October 2017. The Cabinet agreed a subsequent SEND Strategy in November 2019 which aims to continue to drive improvement in this service area.

In Oldham, the Council as one part of Team Oldham are at an exciting point. The scale of ambition is infectious. If this is now channelled into a singular set of key priorities, it will help the Council to deliver robustly and at pace. As delivery is then seen at pace,

this progress should be promoted and celebrated to help further build and sustain corporate momentum. Communications will have a crucial role in all of this. Both internally but also with partners and the community. Being able to clearly communicate the Council's 'asks' will attract willing support and help the Council to further capitalise on the right opportunities as they present themselves.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on the findings within this report in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

To support you in your improvement journey the Peer Team have identified a number of key recommendations, some of which you may already have in hand. We welcome your response to these recommendations within the next three months through the development of an action plan.

Your Principal Adviser Claire Hogan (Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk) will be in contact to assist the council going forward and to provide additional support, advice and guidance on any areas for development and improvement and she will be happy to discuss this.

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2025.