

Auditor's Annual Report

Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council –
year ended 31 March 2021

December 2021



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Section 01: **Introduction**

1. Introduction

Purpose of the Auditor's Annual Report

Our Auditor's Annual Report (AAR) summarises the work we have undertaken as the auditor for Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council ('the Council') for the year ended 31 March 2021. Although this report is addressed to the Council, it is designed to be read by a wider audience including members of the public and other external stakeholders.

Our responsibilities are defined by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the Code of Audit Practice ('the Code') issued by the National Audit Office ('the NAO'). The remaining sections of the AAR outline how we have discharged these responsibilities and the findings from our work. These are summarised below.



Opinion on the financial statements

We issued our audit report on 30 September 2021. Our opinion on the financial statements was unqualified.



Value for Money arrangements

In our audit report issued we reported that we had not completed our work on the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and had not issued recommendations in relation to identified significant weaknesses in those arrangements at the time of reporting. Section 3 confirms that we have now completed this work and provides our commentary on the Council's arrangements. No significant weaknesses in arrangements were identified and there are no recommendations arising from our work.



Wider reporting responsibilities

We have not yet received group instructions from the National Audit Office in respect of our work on the Council's WGA submission. We are unable to commence our work in this area until such instructions have been received.

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Section 02:

Audit of the financial statements

2. Audit of the financial statements

The scope of our audit and the results of our opinion

Our audit was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Code, and International Standards on Auditing (ISAs).

The purpose of our audit is to provide reasonable assurance to users that the financial statements are free from material error. We do this by expressing an opinion on whether the statements are prepared, in all material respects, in line with the financial reporting framework applicable to the Council and whether they give a true and fair view of the Council's financial position as at 31 March 2021 and of its financial performance for the year then ended. Our audit report, issued on 30 September 2021 gave an unqualified opinion on the financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2021.

Our Audit Completion Report, presented to the Council's Audit Committee on 29 July 2021, and our follow up Audit Completion Letter provides further details of the findings of our audit of the Council's financial statements. This includes our conclusions on the identified audit risks and areas of management judgement, internal control recommendations and audit misstatements identified during the course of the audit.

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Section 03:

Commentary on VFM arrangements

3. VFM arrangements – Overall summary

Approach to Value for Money arrangements work

We are required to consider whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The NAO issues guidance to auditors that underpins the work we are required to carry out and sets out the reporting criteria that we are required to consider. The reporting criteria are:

- **Financial sustainability** - How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services
- **Governance** - How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks
- **Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness** - How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

At the planning stage of the audit, we undertake work so we can understand the arrangements that the Council

has in place under each of the reporting criteria; as part of this work we may identify risks of significant weaknesses in those arrangements. Where we identify significant risks, we design a programme of work (risk-based procedures) to enable us to decide whether there is a significant weakness in arrangements. Although we describe this work as planning work, we keep our understanding of arrangements under review and update our risk assessment throughout the audit to reflect emerging issues that may suggest there are further risks of significant weaknesses. We did not identify any risks of significant weaknesses through our work on Value for Money arrangements.

Where our risk-based procedures identify actual significant weaknesses in arrangements, we are required to report these and make recommendations for improvement. There are no significant weaknesses to report.

The table below summarises the outcomes of our work against each reporting criteria. On the following page we outline further detail of the work we have undertaken against each reporting criteria, including the judgements we have applied.

Reporting criteria	Commentary page reference	Risks of significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?	Actual significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?
Financial sustainability	9-10	No	No
Governance	11-12	No	No
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	13-14	No	No

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3. VFM arrangements – Financial Sustainability

Overall commentary on the Financial Sustainability reporting criteria

Background to financial sustainability in 2020/21

The Council entered the 2020/21 financial year as the first national lockdown began and immediately faced a significant operational impact to respond to the range of challenges presented by the pandemic. As part of the national response to Covid-19, central government made a series of policy announcements which impacted on the Council. Consequently the Council was at the forefront of efforts to protect local residents, including the most vulnerable, and to support local businesses.

Some of the Government's initiatives to respond to the covid-19 pandemic were supported by additional funding, and so the Council received significant additional funding in 2020/21. This included general grants to support its Covid-19 response of £28.1m, specific grants of £21.8m of which the Council had discretion over to determine the use of £17.3m, and compensation for business rate reliefs of £25.1m, alongside significant funding provided to support local business in line with the government's national initiatives. This funding helped the Council to support residents and businesses through the year, and provided immediate funding to help mitigate some of the financial pressures caused by the pandemic. The Council's financial sustainability challenges from the Covid-19 pandemic will continue through the medium term and this places considerable pressure on the Council to maintain effective financial sustainability arrangements.

The Council's financial planning and monitoring arrangements

In February 2020 the Council set a balanced budget for the 2020/21 financial year with a total net budget for Council services of £233.5m. This required an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% (including 2% Adult Care precept). Throughout the year the Council regularly updated its budget forecast, enabling budgets to remain up-to-date in the fast-changing and uncertain operating environment of the pandemic. The final net budget reported for the year was £296.7m. Within the original budget approved in February 2020, the Council had identified a budget reduction (savings) requirement of £18.1m alongside a range of initiatives and measures to deliver these reductions.

The Council's financial planning and budgeting arrangements are well established and include a wide range of activities and consultations. The budget setting process includes engagement with senior Council officers and incorporates discussion about the delivery of statutory services/priorities and the impact on resources. Where additional resources are required these are scrutinised and challenged before they are included in the budget estimates. Workshops with officers and members are a key part of the budgeting arrangements, and these are detailed and extensive.

The Council reported its revenue outturn position for 2020/21 as an overall underspend of £2.1m. During the year, the Council provided regular reports of its financial position to Cabinet between months 3 (June 2020) and 9 (December 2020). We have reviewed a sample of the reports presented for 2020/21. These reports were detailed and comprehensive and incorporate monitoring of the revenue budget, the capital programme and a wide range of other financial measures. The Council follows an established timetable for reporting to Cabinet which includes reporting to directorate management teams and the strategic management team.

The Council's arrangements for identifying, managing and monitoring funding gaps and savings

The Council produces a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) each year alongside its annual budget. The MTFS sets out the resources available to deliver the Council's overall commitment to provide services that meet the needs of people locally over a five year period.

A key part of the MTFS is to highlight the budget issues that need to be addressed by the Council in each of the years covered. It reflects assumptions made to allow forecasting of the level of available resources from all sources together with the budget pressures relating to both capital and revenue spending. It also assesses the adequacy of reserves held which may impact on the Council's resources.

The Council's budget setting process, which begins in the summer, is a detailed and comprehensive process. There is detailed consultation and discussion with officers and members on the assumptions and principles on which the budget is to be based. As part of the budget setting process, the Council explicitly identifies its budget reduction requirements for the following years through detailed consideration of the budgetary pressures, funding estimates, and impact of national and local initiatives and policies. A range of officer workshops are held to review proposals for budget reductions with each proposal supported by evidenced assessments of deliverability. Proposals are subject to consultation with staff, officers and members and are presented to meetings attended by Cabinet & Deputy Cabinet Members and senior officers, Overview & Scrutiny, and Cabinet before submission to, and approval at, Full Council. We reviewed a range of the budget preparation documents and meetings held as part of the budget setting process. Our review confirmed that the documents were comprehensive and detailed and the workshops and meetings were timely and delivered the intended outcomes to assist with the budget preparation.

The budget reduction requirement identified in the MTFS 2020/21 to 2024/25 for 2021/22 was £23.2m with a further £26m required in the following two years. In setting the 2021/22 budget and MTFS, the budget reduction requirement for the period 2021/22 to 2023/24 was £30m after the use of £29m of reserves and after applying other budget reduction schemes. The budget reports for each year are clear on the means by which the savings will be delivered and clearly articulate the size of the challenge the Council faces in the medium term.

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3. VFM arrangements – Financial Sustainability

Overall commentary on the Financial Sustainability reporting criteria - continued

Council’s arrangements and approach to 2021/22 financial planning

The Council’s arrangements for the 2021/22 budget setting process have largely followed the arrangements in place for 2020/21.

The budget for 2021/22 was approved at the March 2021 Council meeting. The Council set a balanced budget with a total net budget for Council services of £254.2m with an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% (including 2% Adult Care precept). The budget included £8.8m of recurrent budget reductions and £16.8m use of reserves.

We have reviewed the supporting evidence relating to the preparation of the 2021/22 budget and these demonstrate that the arrangements are consistent with the previous year, detailed and robust and properly applied.

Based on the above considerations we are satisfied there is not a significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements in relation to financial sustainability.

3. VFM arrangements – Governance

Overall commentary on the Governance reporting criteria

The Council’s risk management and monitoring arrangements

The Council has a well established risk management system in place and embedded in the governance structure of the organisation. The Council refreshed its Risk Management Strategy in 2019/20 and during 2020/21 this was implemented and integrated into the Council's agreed service planning arrangements. The risk management arrangements incorporate service and directorate risk registers informed by detailed assessments of the key risks impacting on each area. These detailed registers inform the Council's corporate risk register which sets out the key strategic and corporate risks. The risk registers apply a risk score both before and after mitigation measures and enable the Council to manage the risks actively and take action where necessary. We have reviewed the risk management strategy along with examples of service risk registers and the corporate risk register. Our review confirms the strategy is clear and detailed, and the registers appear comprehensive, containing sufficient and appropriate detail for Council officers and members.

The Council reports its risk registers through its governance framework, culminating in regular reports to the Audit Committee. Our attendance at the Audit Committee meetings has confirmed that the Committee understands its role in the risk management framework. It provides challenge to management on the risk registers and corresponding risks and mitigating actions.

The Council has a team of internal auditors, led by the Assistant Director of Corporate Governance and Strategic Financial Management, who provide assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud. The annual Internal Audit plan is ordinarily agreed with management at the start of the financial year and is reviewed by the Audit Committee prior to final approval. In 2020/21, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted significantly on Internal Audit's plans and a revised and updated plan was presented to the Committee in September 2020. The audit plan is based on an assessment of risks the Council faces and is determined to ensure there is assurance on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's framework of governance, risk management and control. The planned work is supplemented by ad hoc reviews in respect of suspected irregularities and other work to respond to emerging risks and issues. We have reviewed the Internal Audit plans for 2020/21 and 2021/22 and confirmed they are consistent with the risk based approach. The Council has comprehensive anti-fraud and corruption policies which are updated as required and during 2020/21 the whistleblowing policy was updated. In 2020/21 a significant focus of the Council's anti-fraud work was in implementing processes to minimise any loss on business grants by putting in place checks to minimise fraud/ loss before payments were made to businesses.

Internal Audit progress reports are presented to each Audit Committee meeting, including follow up reporting on recommendations from previous Internal Audit reports. From our attendance at meetings, we are satisfied this allows the Committee to effectively hold management to account. At the end of each financial year the Head of Internal Audit provides an opinion based on the work completed during the year. For 2020/21 the Head of Internal Audit concluded that an adequate level of assurance could be given that the Council's overall framework of governance, risk management and control remains appropriate and has been complied with. Whilst this reflected the significant impact of the pandemic, the annual report highlighted the significant improvements that continued to be made in key control areas.

Throughout the year we have attended all Audit Committee meetings. These meetings have received regular updates on both internal audit progress and risk management. Audit Committee members engage with the reports and challenge the papers and reports which they receive from management, internal audit and external audit.

Council arrangements for budget setting and budgetary control

The 2020/21 Budget Report was approved in February 2020, setting out the estimates of the financial challenge for the financial year 2021/22. During 2020/21, this was updated regularly and the likely financial position for 2021/22 was reported to Cabinet. Monthly financial monitoring reports were prepared for 2020/21 which highlighted key issues which may impact on 2021/22, with the financial monitoring reports presented to senior managers, Members and then to Cabinet for approval. During the summer months of 2020, there were a series of officer and member workshops to consider the updated financial position and to agree budget reduction proposals for consultation with staff and the public. Members were engaged closely in discussions about the level of Council Tax increase and, through this engagement, the Council changed from its original approach so the proposed general increase in Council tax was reduced from 1.99% to a final position of 0.99%.

The Council has well established budget monitoring arrangements in place. The Finance service is configured to align to the Council's management portfolio structure. Members of the Finance Team are assigned to specific service areas and work closely with cost centre managers to review, discuss and agree the financial pressures/ issues impacting on specific service areas. At the end of each month, a Portfolio dashboard is prepared which contains all relevant financial information. Forecasts are produced for cost centres, service areas and the whole Portfolio. These are discussed and agreed with relevant Directors and managers.

3. VFM arrangements – Governance

Overall commentary on the Governance reporting criteria - continued

Council arrangements for budget setting and budgetary control (continued)

There is a detailed budget monitoring timetable to which the Finance service works to ensure that reports are timely. Overall financial monitoring reports are prepared encompassing the whole Council position for both Capital and Revenue. During 2020/21, these budget monitoring reports were prepared for Cabinet for months 3 through to 9. The format of the report has been subject to review to ensure relevant information was available. As a result, in 2020/21, the reports were adapted to report on the impact of COVID including information on specific grants including business grants and other grants where the Council acted as an agent.

Budget monitoring reports were also presented to the Performance and Value for Money Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration. In addition, during 2020/21 a new group (the Financial Assistance to Business Group) made up of senior officers and the Leader and two Deputy Leaders was established to ensure Members were sighted on the grants received by the Council.

Council decision making arrangements and control framework

The Council's decision making arrangements are established in the Council Constitution. Decisions are either made by members (Council, Cabinet, or other decision making committees) or delegated to Cabinet portfolio leads, or officers.

All Cabinet and Key Decision reports include Statutory Officer Comments and Risks, and an assessment of financial impacts and other key impact areas such as human resources, IT and property. The Council has a range of overview and scrutiny committees that challenge and scrutinise Council decisions.

During 2020/21 the Council adapted its decision making arrangements to respond to the challenges of Covid-19, adopting a 'Gold', 'Silver' and 'Bronze' meeting structure to ensure decisions were made at an appropriate level. This structure included the Council and its relevant partners. The structure enabled the Council to proactively manage its emerging risks and to take properly informed decisions in an appropriate timescale.

The Council operates an Audit Committee which has the appropriate status in the organisation to challenge management and obtain assurance on the operation of the internal control framework. The Committee has an agreed workplan and where necessary asks management to report on specific internal control issues. The Audit Committee met regularly throughout the year and routinely considered key reports on internal controls.

During the year the Committee identified that it required additional assurance on the Council's partnership arrangements. Consequently a partnership dashboard was developed which identified and reported the potential risks to the Council from its partnership arrangements.

Based on the above considerations we are satisfied there is not a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements in relation to governance.

3. VFM arrangements – Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness

Overall commentary on the Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness reporting criteria

The Council's arrangements for assessing performance and evaluating service delivery

The Council prepares performance monitoring and financial monitoring reports which are presented to senior management, Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The overarching financial monitoring position is included in the performance reports. During 2020/21, financial monitoring reports provided information about the financial pressures being experienced. This highlighted new or increased service demand in some areas. These reports also focused on the impact of Covid-19, including the impact of the many government initiatives and policies on the Council's financial and operational performance. These reports are also used to identify service delivery challenges, for example where increased costs are incurred to address service backlogs or underlying underperformance. Where such issues are highlighted through financial monitoring, the resources required as an investment to address this are identified. During 2020/21, many of the performance indicators were suspended due to the focus on Covid-19 pressures. Performance reporting was therefore revised to take account of the circumstances.

The Council agrees and establishes a range of performance indicators for all directorates. These indicators are reviewed by services and reported initially to senior officers so that issues requiring action are understood including additional investment. Corporate performance reports are reported to senior management and members. During 2020/21, performance monitoring reports were prepared for the Performance and Value for Money Overview & Scrutiny Committee. We have reviewed a sample of these reports and this confirmed that they clearly articulate the Council's performance and contain appropriate and detailed information.

The Council has a business planning process which requires detailed business plans to be agreed with respective Cabinet Members. Key performance indicators and measures then are encompassed within the corporate performance report. The Directorate plans are managed and monitored using a standard format.

During 2020/21 as a result of the impact of Covid-19 the Council decided to roll over the business plans from 2019/20 and monitor performance against these. At the end of 2020/21, a new business planning cycle was initiated aligned to the risk management framework. The preparation for the new business planning programme took place during 2020/21 with business plans finalised forwards the end of 2020/21 for action in 2021/22. The business planning process was updated during 2020/21 so that in 2021/22 the reports would have a greater focus on benchmarking Council performance against comparators.

In addition to the corporate performance reporting, the Council has a range of internal performance and management information dashboards which enable it to evaluate performance and identify areas for

improvement. We have reviewed a sample of these dashboards and this confirmed that they clearly articulate the Council's performance and are appropriate for managing performance.

The Council's arrangements for effective partnership working

The Council monitors its delivery on key partnerships including an ongoing assessment of risk as set out in the Partnership Dashboard which reports regularly to the Audit Committee. This identifies both current issues and emerging issues, for example, where there are plans to set up new partnerships to deliver key future priorities. As at 31 March 2021 the assessment of risk on partnerships operated by the Council was reported as low. The Council's key partnerships include Oldham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and its two wholly owned subsidiary companies, MioCare Community Interest Company and Unity Partnerships Ltd.

The two Council owned companies both work closely with the Council as its significant customer. There are key governance arrangements in place within the Council to ensure efficient oversight of the companies including annual reports to Scrutiny Committees and the Council appointing Members to the company Boards.

During 2020/21 the Council continued to work closely with the CCG to manage services with the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on health and social care. The Council is party to a pooling of funds with the CCG and operates joint scrutiny arrangements to oversee the joint working arrangements. During 2020/21 some joint management responsibilities were in place across the Council and the CCG.

The Council has a joint Commissioning Partnership Board on which the Leader and Cabinet Members for Adult Social Care represent the Council. This Board oversees the pooled fund agreement and receives financial performance reports relating to the arrangement.

The Council's arrangements for procurement and commissioning services

The Council's Constitution contains a chapter on the Contract Procedure Rules. This sets out the detailed process that the Council must follow when procuring goods or services. We have reviewed the procedure rules and this confirms that they are comprehensive and cover the procedures, the quotation and tender process, using frameworks, post tender evaluation and contract monitoring procedures.

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3. VFM arrangements – Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness

Overall commentary on the Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness reporting criteria - continued

The Council’s arrangements for procurement and commissioning services (continued)

The Council has an experienced Commercial Procurement Unit leading on procurement and commissioning. The team appoints ‘Category Leads’ who work closely with commissioners to develop the forward view pipeline over the medium term. This enables the Council to be able to plan its procurement and commissioning activities well in advance. We reviewed the pipeline and confirmed it was detailed and comprehensive and facilitated the Council’s proactive management of its procurement over the medium term.

The category lead role includes working with commissioners to develop the specifications, identifying opportunities for possible collaboration or amalgamation of contracts, engaging with the market, developing KPIs, reviewing contract management information, maintaining an active dialogue with suppliers, and ensuring that the contracts stay up to date through the contract period.

Where contract management information suggests that contracts are not being delivered to the specification, the Council engages with suppliers to put in place improvements. Maintaining a routine dialogue with suppliers is crucial in managing the relationship and in ensuring disputes and disagreements are minimised or avoided.

The Council established the expected outcomes and benefits from procurement in a series of key performance indicators in each contract. These are tailored specifically to the specification of each contract and are actively monitored to ensure the benefits are being delivered. Regular dialogue between the category leads and the Council’s commissioners and suppliers ensures the delivery benefits are up to date and remain appropriate through the contract, and that any innovation or efficiencies identified is included in updated contract terms. We reviewed a sample of procurement monitoring reports and key performance indicators and confirmed that they were detailed and appropriate.

Based on the above considerations we are satisfied there is not a significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements in relation to improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

04

Section 04:

**Other reporting responsibilities and
our fees**

4. Other reporting responsibilities and our fees

Matters we report by exception

The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 provides auditors with specific powers where matters come to our attention that, in their judgement, require specific reporting action to be taken. Auditors have the power to:

- issue a report in the public interest;
- make statutory recommendations that must be considered and responded to publicly;
- apply to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to the law; and
- issue an advisory notice.

We have not exercised any of these statutory reporting powers.

The 2014 Act also gives rights to local electors and other parties, such as the right to ask questions of the auditor and the right to make an objection to an item of account. We did not receive any such objections, but a member of the public brought to our attention a non-material matter which we are considering.

Reporting to the NAO in respect of Whole of Government Accounts consolidation data

The NAO, as group auditor, requires us to complete the WGA Assurance Statement in respect of its consolidation data, and to carry out certain tests on the data. We have not yet received group instructions from the National Audit Office in respect of our work on the Council's WGA submission. We are unable to commence our work in this area until such instructions have been received.

4. Other reporting responsibilities and our fees

Fees for work as the Council's auditor

We reported our proposed fees for the delivery of our work under the Code of Audit Practice in our Audit Strategy Memorandum presented to the Audit Committee in June 2021. With the exception of the work on the Council's Whole of Government Accounts submission, as highlighted on page 16 we have completed our work for the 2020/21 financial year, and based on the work completed to date we can confirm that our fees are as follows:.

Area of work	2019/20 fees	2020/21 fees
Planned fee in respect of our work under the Code of Audit Practice	£104,428	£104,428
Recurrent scope changes: Additional testing on Property, Plant & Equipment and Defined Benefit Pensions Schemes as a result of changes in regulatory expectations	£17,750	£17,750
In-year scope changes: Additional testing as a result of the implementation of new auditing standards: ISA 220 (Revised): Quality control of an audit of financial statements; ISA 540 (Revised): Auditing accounting estimates and related disclosures; ISA570 (Revised) Going Concern; and ISA 600 (Revised): Specific considerations – audit of group financial statements	£4,500	£2,000
Additional requirements for Oldham MBC: Other additional costs related to Enhanced Audit Reporting, Financial Instruments and Operating Leases	£7,500	£4,500
Value for money work: Additional work arising from the change in the Code of Audit Practice	-	£10,000
Total fees	£134,178	£138,678

Fees for other work

We confirm that we have not undertaken any non-audit services for the Council in the year.

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