

## Report to CABINET

# Children's Services Investment Proposals

### Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Eddie Moores, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

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### Reason for Decision

In May 2022 annual Council adopted the Administrations priorities for 2022/23. One priority area for this Council is to have a relentless focus on children and young people to ensure that they enjoy a happy, healthy and safe childhood. In September 2022, the Council further declared children and young people to be its number one priority with that focus underpinning the organisation's new five-year corporate plan.

As part of this focus the Council's Children's Social Care and Early Help services have embarked upon a challenging "Getting to Good" programme which will see the Council improve the quality of its vital social work and safeguarding services and the experiences and outcomes of those in need of them.

To support both our overall priority for children and young people and the continuous improvement of our existing services the Council is proposing a significant investment into services that support and safeguard children, young people, and their families.

### Executive Summary

Oldham Council is proposing a £14.7 million investment into vital children's social care and family support services in the borough. This investment will;

- Provide better support for families, at an earlier stage, to avoid the need for social care involvement, including:
  - The targeting of £3 million of external funding to provide a greater range of services, support and activities at key children's centres
  - The targeting of £2.7 million of external funding to target support for families currently struggling and needing less intensive support

- Extra work with schools, colleges and with voluntary, community and faith organisation's to improve the amount and level of support available for families in local communities
- Provide the very best care for Oldham's most vulnerable children and young people by:
  - Investing in additional capacity in the teams assessing and making-decisions on vulnerable children and young people's care and support needs
  - Increasing the teams, we have supporting fostering and special guardianship orders so that more children and young people have a home within a family setting
  - Increasing the amount of move-on accommodation available in Oldham to support those young people ready to leave care to live independently
  - Establishing a scheme to provide deposits and first month's rent and/or acting as guarantors for young people ready to move into independent accommodation and housing
  - Establishing a new council-run children's home for local children and young people with learning disabilities so fewer children need to be cared for outside of the borough
- Make Oldham one of the best places to be a social worker by:
  - Recruiting 50 more permanent social workers to ensure manageable caseloads and reduce the need for agency social workers as much as possible
  - Recruiting 17 new Social Work Support Officers to free up social workers for more time with children and families
  - Reviewing current pay and conditions for children's social work staff to ensure we are better able to attract and retain the most talented social workers
- Recognise, reward and better support Oldham's Foster Carers by;
  - Increasing allowances and skills payments by 10%
  - Recruiting five highly trained specialist foster carers to offer additional training, support and advice to foster carers across the borough – focusing on supporting those who care for some of the most vulnerable children and young people to help them remain in foster care

## **Recommendations**

Cabinet is asked to;

- Agree the proposed investment into children's services and the invest to save strategy aligned with it
- Delegate decisions around the implementation of the invest to save strategy to the managing Director of Children's Services and the Director of Legal Services.

## Children's Services Investment Proposals

### 1 Background

- 1.1 In September 2022, the Council declared Children and Young People to be its number one priority, with that focus underpinning the new five-year corporate plan.
- 1.2 Oldham Council is committed to delivering the very best services for our children and young people and there is collective ambition and support to drive improvements across Children's Services to ensure all our children and young people live a happy, healthy and safe childhood. Alongside this, progress is being made on the Council's 'Getting to Good' programme which will see the quality, experience and outcomes for children, young people and families improve.
- 1.3 However, Children's Services across the country are facing significant challenges, with demand for support from Children's Social Care and Early Help at its highest ever levels. This pattern of growing demand has been exacerbated by significant additional pressures on Oldham families because of both the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. These pressures are causing more families to struggle and the demand on Children's Social Care and Early Help services is continuing to rise as people need more support.
- 1.4 At the same time, demand for social workers to support those families has never been higher. There is a nationwide challenge to recruit social workers with an increasing reliance on agency workers to work alongside permanent staff to meet current levels of demand. As a result of such high demand across the sector the cost of agency staff has also significantly risen in recent years, placing additional challenges on local authority budgets.
- 1.5 Alongside this our use of external care placements – either through agency foster care or commissioned residential placements has risen by almost 200% with the cost of these placements also increasing significantly. Additional legal costs, costs to provide respite care and costs to support struggling families to remain together have also had an impact on Children's Social care budgets. Together the impact of additional demand, increasing reliance on agency workers and rising costs of both staff and placements is currently creating additional cost pressures of over 25% on total children's services budget.
- 1.6 To respond to these challenges, proposals have been developed for consideration by the Cabinet to deliver significant investment across Children's Services. The proposed investment is a total of £14.7m which will enable us to respond to the challenges we face more quickly and effectively; investing in our children and young people and their families to live happy, healthy and safe lives in their homes.
- 1.7 These proposals are set out below and are broken down into the following areas:
  - Better support for families at an earlier stage
  - Providing the very best of care for our most vulnerable children
  - Supporting children and young people by making Oldham the best place to be a social worker

- Rewarding and supporting the work of Oldham's Foster Carers.

## **2 Investment Proposals**

### **2.1 Better support for families, at an earlier stage, to avoid the need for future social care involvement**

- 2.1.1 It is clear that reducing the future levels of need for children's social care will require investment in improved, earlier support for Oldham families. Through this investment Oldham aims to reduce the number of families needing council support by up to a third over the next three to six years.
- 2.1.2 As part of this focus on earlier intervention and better-quality support for all families the Council proposes to deliver a new model for its children's centres – offering enhanced services from some of our centres to act as 'Family Hubs' with more on-site support and facilities, advice, and support from a wider range of services and agencies, and improved family activities. This proposal will be funded through £3 million of agreed external funding.
- 2.1.3 In addition to the universal offer for families delivered through our children's centres and the new Family Hubs, the Council will target £1.5 million of external funding into dedicated family support services for those who are struggling the most and £1.2 million to provide earlier support to a wider range of families needing less intensive support.
- 2.1.4 As part of this, and in recognition of the vital role that the VCSFE sector plays in supporting Oldham families, small grants to voluntary, community and faith groups who are supporting children and young people in their local community will be available. This will see investment of £180k of external funding over a period of three years.
- 2.1.5 In addition, work with schools and other organisations who already support Oldham children, young people and families will be heightened to better equip them to provide early support and advice to families who need it and allow them to refer to wider support services before they reach crisis point.

### **2.2 Providing the very best of care for Oldham's most vulnerable children**

- 2.2.1 Despite our continued focus on supporting families, unfortunately a significant number of children and young people will continue to need to be cared for by Oldham Council. As their parents we need to continually challenge ourselves to ensure we are providing the very best care for the borough's most vulnerable children. That means acting in their best interests by making timely decisions about their support and care needs. It also means, wherever possible, providing Oldham's children looked after with access to a family home environment through fostering and special guardianship arrangements. We also believe they should be supported and cared for within the borough where safe to do so, to allow them access to local support networks. And at the end of their time as children looked after we want Oldham's young people to have the best support to transition to live well and independently into adulthood.
- 2.2.2 It is vital that we make effective and timely decisions around the safety of children and young people and the care and support they need. As a result, it is proposed that the team supporting assessments and decision-making around children's

safety and wellbeing is increased to create two additional chairs for Child Protection meetings and an additional Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) as a single point of contact for any concerns about those working with or in contact with children. Alongside this we are proposing to recruit four additional family workers to meet the increased demand for supervised contact between children and young people and their family members in controlled settings.

- 2.2.3 It is also proposed to increase the number of staff within the permanence and fostering team; enabling us to deliver quicker, long-term, and permanent homes for Oldham's children looked after through more foster care arrangements and more special guardianship orders providing more children with a family environment.
- 2.2.4 The creation of additional move-on accommodation for over 18s within the borough will better prepare young people who have been in care to transition to live independently successfully. To further support those young people as they leave care, it is proposed that the Council create a scheme to enable the organisation to act as guarantor and/ or provide the first month's rent and any deposits as they move into independent accommodation and housing.
- 2.2.5 Oldham Council wants local children to be cared for within the borough wherever possible, allowing the easiest access to support from family and friends and from local services. To enable this, we are proposing to invest in additional Oldham Council run residential care placements specifically for children and young people with learning disabilities within the borough meaning fewer children and young people being housed away from their local area. This proposal will require a mix of capital funding, to buy a building suitable for this use, and additional revenue funding to staff and maintain the home.
- 2.2.6 By creating these additional homes for our children and young people within the borough and by investing in the teams supporting achieving permanence we hope to reduce the number of children looked after housed outside of the borough by around 50 over the next six years.
- 2.3 Supporting Children and Young People by making Oldham the best place to be a social worker
- 2.3.1 The Council is absolutely committed to supporting our workforce and recognises the work that staff within Children's Services do to improve the lives of local children and young people. However, we are working in an environment where delivering safe and effective Children's Services is a key challenge for councils across the country; exacerbated by a significant national workforce crisis across Children's Social Care in particular. Councils across the country are struggling to recruit new social workers and to retain their existing staff in a very competitive employment market.
- 2.3.2 In recognition of these challenges, in October 2022, we launched our new Social Work Academy to attract, recruit and retain social workers. The academy offers those already in the profession further training and development, encouraging career progression and overall professional development. It also targets those people who would like to enter the social work field by providing social work apprenticeships and degrees, and career development opportunities.
- 2.3.3 To continue to meet the current demand for Children's Social Care and to ensure social worker caseloads are at a level to allow them to support children and families effectively we propose to recruit an additional 50 permanent children's social

workers. The proposal would increase our overall number of children's social workers by more than 25% and reduce our current use of agency social workers, and the additional costs driven by agency staff usage, significantly.

- 2.3.4 To support the work of our social work teams and to further increase the time they can spend with Oldham's children, young people, and families we are also proposing the recruitment of 17 additional Social Work Support Officers. These officers will play a vital role, taking on administrative and support duties for each social work team.
- 2.3.5 In a competitive market, alongside attracting new talent to Oldham we also need to ensure we are rewarding our existing social workers at a level commensurate with the wider employment market to retain them for as long as possible. We have reviewed our current salary levels against other local authorities and, while our salaries are competitive at most levels, we have identified a need to review the salary levels for some roles to ensure they are in line with the best-paying Greater Manchester local authorities.
- 2.3.6 In addition, and in line with the approach taken by similar local authorities, we are proposing to reward the loyal service of social workers with a one-off payment of £2,000 after two years of continuous service with Oldham Council from December 2022. The council also proposes that we pay for children's social workers annual registration fees for their professional body – Social Work England from April 2023.
- 2.3.7 These proposals will support our existing investment in our social work academy, as we continue with our commitment to recruit more newly qualified social workers, support our existing workforce, and attract ex-social workers back to practice. By investing in our workforce on a permanent basis, alongside our investment in early help we can avoid significant additional costs for agency social workers and look to reduce the overall numbers of social workers needed to support Oldham families in line with decreasing demand over the coming years.
- 2.4 Recognising and Supporting Oldham's Foster Carers
  - 2.4.1 The Council acknowledges the amazing work of foster carers in Oldham and the positive impact they have on the lives of our children looked after and young people.
  - 2.4.2 To protect and grow the number of foster care placements available to Oldham children and young people we need to invest in our foster carers.
  - 2.4.3 To do this we want to reward our foster carers for their contribution to the lives of Oldham's most vulnerable children and young people. We are proposing to increase current in-house foster care allowances and skills payments by 10%. This change will benefit Oldham foster carers by an average of £2,000 per foster placement every year. This increase will be implemented from 1 January 2023.
  - 2.4.4 In addition, we propose to recruit five new highly trained 'specialist foster carers' to support our existing foster carers with additional training, advice, and support in caring for our most vulnerable children and young people, enabling more of them to remain in foster care.

2.4.5 Alongside our investment in new residential care and move-on accommodation these proposals will allow us to reduce the use of external placements for Oldham children and young people by around 50 over the next six years.

### 3 Options/Alternatives

3.1 Option 1: Approve the investments contained in this report which aim to improve services for children and young people and families, support quality social work and reward foster carers.

3.2 Option 2: Do nothing. This option would remove our ability to tackle rising demand for support and care leading to spiraling costs to deliver Children's Services and a risk to the quality of services we provide.

### 4 Preferred Option

Option 1: Approve the investments contained in this report which aim to improve services for children and young people and families, support quality social work and reward foster carers.

### 5 Consultation

5.1 Engagement has taken place with those affected by the proposals which include, staff, trade unions and foster carers.

### 6 Financial Implications

6.1 The report is seeking approval for financial investment to fund a programme of work to support the Children's Social Care and Early Help demand management strategy for the next six years, commencing in 2023/24 and running through to 2028/29.

6.2 The scope of work and project proposals being put forward are detailed within this report. An initial revenue investment of £14.700m in 2023/24 is a mixture of additional recurrent funding of £11.800m to support the current financial position and reserves of £2.900m to 'pump prime' a number of invest to save initiatives throughout the Portfolio. These initiatives will deliver on-going saving from 2025/26. In addition, to this investment is £0.150m to support the extra legal costs resulting from the increased service demand.

6.3 The table below, which aligns to the initiatives outlined at paragraphs 2.2 to 2.4 summarises the net investment required and the anticipated returns, which have been built into the Council's budget setting process and Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Report Ref	Description	2023/24 £k	2024/25 £k	2025/26 £k	2026/27 £k	2027/28 £k	2028/29 £k
	Additional Funding	11,800	11,800	11,800	11,800	11,800	11,800
	<b>Specific Initiatives</b>						
2.2	Providing The Best Care	583	35	(146)	(248)	(234)	(305)
2.3	A Better Place to be a Social Worker	2,941	1,331	234	(496)	(1,146)	(1,937)
2.4	Supporting Foster Carers	(624)	(1,366)	(2,274)	(2,735)	(3,097)	(3,529)
	<b>Investment Initiatives- Reserves</b>	<b>2,900</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>Return on the Investment</b>			<b>(2,186)</b>	<b>(3,479)</b>	<b>(4,477)</b>	<b>(5,772)</b>

- 6.4 Clearly there is significant risk attached to programmes that are predicated on new ways of working to reduce demand leading to cost reductions which will need to be closely monitored from both a financial and operational perspective to ensure that the target returns are achieved.
- 6.5 The proposals at 2.1 “Better Support for Families” are wholly funded by external grant and as such are not expected to require additional Council investment to deliver the planned outcomes.
- 6.6 Included within “Providing the Best Care”, is a proposal to acquire a property to support in borough residential care. Funding for this is included within the capital programme. (Sadrul Alam, Finance Manager)

## **7 Legal Services Comments**

- 7.1 Children’s Services is a vital statutory service and the report sets out the significant challenges being faced in terms of adequately resourcing and recruitment and retention of staff to enable the provision of such services.
- 7.2 With regard to the proposed payments such should be closely audited, monitored and reviewed to evidence and reflect the prevailing market, need which is necessary to demonstrate that any differential in pay is genuinely due to a material factor which does not itself discriminate against another group of employees. (Colin Britain, Assistant Borough Solicitor)

## **8. Co-operative Agenda**

- 8.1 As a Co-operative Council, Oldham is committed to working together to help our children and young people to thrive wherever they live in the borough and whatever challenges they might face. The proposed investment will support this ambition, building a more sustainable workforce and improving services for children, young people and their families. (Jonathan Downs – Corporate Policy Lead)

## **9 Human Resources Comments**

- 9.1 The report sets out the significant workforce challenges that are being faced by Children’s Services and identifies a coordinated and focused approach to actively address these issues. HR supports the proposals to invest in key areas of the workforce to support attraction and retention of Children’s Social Workers, and to actively reduce the risk of key skills gaps, uncertainty of future workforce, and instability that prolonged agency reliance brings.

Whilst the proposals are a positive measure, the council will need to monitor the impact on other staff groups and ensure changes are made in line with equal pay policies.

A detailed engagement and communications exercise will be undertaken with staff to provide the evidence base and rationale for the decisions. (Vikki Morris, Assistant Director of HR & OD)

## **10 Risk Assessments**

- 10.1 The Council if it does not manage the demand within Children’s Social Care there is a risk it will impact on the long-term resilience of the Council as costs continue to



increase. This report with investment sets out a proposed way this future demand could be managed leading to future efficiencies which if successful will support the future financial resilience of the Council.

- 10.2 As the legal comments indicate one of the proposals does have a specific risk (Mark Stenson Assistant Director of Finance)

## 11 **IT Implications**

- 11.1 N/a

## 12 **Property Implications**

- 12.1 N/a at this stage

## 13 **Procurement Implications**

- 13.1 Children's Services are amongst the vital services, which are in Oldham Council, the report sets out the challenges this directorate is facing in terms of adequately resourcing and recruitment, retention of staff however Council policies and procedures should be followed when employment decisions are made to avert any unlawful claims. It is important the consultation has been taken with all the parties in the council concerned. It is also recommended that should the service foresee these roles being required in the longer term then the service structure is carried out with a view to establishing the post accordingly. (Mohammad Sharif 05/12/2022)

## 14 **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**

- 14.1 None (Neil Crabtree, Head of Public Protection)

## 15 **Equality, community cohesion and crime implications**

- 15.1 Early intervention and effective support is recognised as a key factor in preventing young people from becoming involved in anti-social behaviour and crime; and the resulting significant demand which is placed on services both internally and externally.

The additional local resources will provide consistency for young people and families and will allow for trusted relationships to be developed and joint working with services to keep young people and families safe from harm and the potential lifelong effects of resulting trauma.

(Lorraine Kenny – Head of Violence Reduction and Community Safety Services)

## 16 **Equality Impact Assessment Completed?**

- 16.1 **Yes** – The service has completed a Stage 1 EIA that demonstrates the proposals will have a positive impact on Children and Young People and Young People with Disabilities. It is important to continue working with service users, ensuring the voice of children and young people and their families continue to shape the proposals. (Jonathan Downs, Corporate Policy Lead)

## 17 **Key Decision**

- 17.1 Yes

18 **Key Decision Reference**

18.1 A rule 13 was sought and agreed by the Chair of Policy and Overview Scrutiny Committee due to the need to agree the investment.

19 **Background Papers**

19.1 N/A

20 **Appendices**

20.1 None