

Report to COUNCIL 1 November 2023

Cabinet Report of Finance and Corporate Resources Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Abdul Jabbar, Cabinet member,
Finance and Corporate Resources

Recommendations: Council is requested to note the report.

This report provides an update on the main activity since the last Council meeting relating to portfolio responsibilities. Council is requested to note the report.

Finance

The Council's accounts for 2022/23 were submitted to the auditors by the deadline of 31st May, one of only [34%] % nationally and [4] Councils within GM to meet the deadline. The audit now is almost complete with some technical matters – such as accounting for potential RAAC implications – outstanding.

The results for the half year to September have been prepared, these highlight the financial pressures faced by this Council (and many other Councils across the country). There are unprecedented demands for Council Services, in particular the number of children being looked after by the Council and a massive increase in families requiring temporary accommodation. This is not unique to Oldham, all Greater Manchester local authorities are facing unprecedented demand for these services.

The projected deficit for the year is forecast at over £10 million and the increased demand for these services looks set to continue for a number of a year to come. As a result, the Council will face significant challenges in setting its budget for 2024/25 and difficult decisions will be required.

Revenues & Benefits

In-year collection rates for both council tax and business rates remain on track despite the cost-of-living challenges still being faced by many households.

At the end of September, the in-year collection rate for council tax was 54.59% and for business rates was 56.39%. This means we are on target to meet our annual target rates

for collection of 94% for council Tax and 97% for Business Rates. Whereas a few years ago Oldham had one of the lowest Council Tax collection rates, Oldham is currently in a strong position compared to other GM authorities, such as Rochdale (54%), Stockport (53.25%), and Tameside (54.13%).

Progress is being made to reduce the outstanding arrears for previous years debts, with £3m collected for council tax and £1.1m for business rates in the first half of the year. Additional technology is being introduced to increase efficiency, reduce processing times and improving the resident experience reducing repeat contact.

Performance

Following feedback from Scrutiny members the team have redesigned the Corporate Performance Reports to become a more visual overview of performance across the areas of People Services (Adults, Children's and Public Health), Place Services (Economy, Environment) and Corporate Services (Finance, HR and OD, IT, Customer Services). Each report will go to the appropriate Scrutiny quarterly.

Performance reports are being migrated to the new PowerBI system as we decommission the Corvu system (complete end October).

Transformation

The Transformation programme is now in full delivery focusing on:

- managing service demand by focusing on how we support our residents earlier and prevent the escalation of need, primarily in children and adult services
- working more closely with partners to join up services locally in a place residents can conveniently access drive digital, customer focused improvements to services, including more self-service where appropriate, primarily concentrating on environmental and housing services where we have the biggest demand and potential savings ensuring we collect and use Data effectively to improve services. These change programmes act together to help meet the financial challenge.

Customer and Digital Experience

We continue to deliver improvements across Town Hall sites in each district as part of a phased approach. The first site at Failsworth Town Hall includes refreshed signage and more services available to access closer to home. Improving Customer Experience Guidelines have been launched with Managers to cascade through their teams following briefing sessions earlier this year.

In response to demand into the Customer Support Centre, we have established priority areas to focus on end-to-end improvements within Council Tax, Housing and Waste projects. Projects have started with delivery phased into Spring 2024 onwards.

Information Technology

ICT continues to protect Oldham Council from increasing external threats and internal vulnerabilities. We have deployed a cutting-edge threat management solution, providing

round-the-clock threat hunting and active remediation. Our next focus area is establishing a robust data backup service that guarantees data restoration during a catastrophic incident or ransomware attack. We are also actively addressing internal and supply chain vulnerability management, ensuring our council remains resilient in emerging challenges.

Green New Deal

Oldham is at the forefront of a ground-breaking, pathfinder project to provide a Town Centre Low Carbon District Heat Network, which will utilise a variety of low carbon heat sources including biomass, air source, wastewater and mine water. If successful, the project will attract £30m of funding from the Government and private sector.

In order to develop the project further, the Council has applied for two grants totalling £2.6m of funding to take the feasibility and design work to next level and also procure a strategic commercial partner to deliver this and other projects.

Decisions in respect of the grants are expected by the end of this year

HR Services

Like all local authorities Oldham Council is facing significant challenges relating to our workforce including challenges in recruiting to key roles, including social workers, retention of staff in key roles given comparable pay rates in the agency and private sectors and the wellbeing of our workforce. We are developing a new workforce strategy over the next six months which will learn from best practice elsewhere and test innovative new approaches to deal with these challenges.

The HR and Legal teams are also undertaking some assurance work regarding Equal Pay issues being highlighted elsewhere across the country to understand any potential challenges for Oldham.