



LEVELLING UP OLDHAM

The Oldham Economic Review of
Economic Transformation and Civic Pride

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OERB | Oldham Economic
Review Board

MARCH 2022

FOREWORD

Oldham residents are rightly proud of the place we call home. From the monumental mills that remind us of our heritage in the cotton industry, to communities where the impulse to help out a neighbour is still strong, to the glorious Peaks on our doorstep, Oldham has a lot going for it.

There's no doubt, however, that we have potential that's currently untapped. Our position in Greater Manchester and the youth and talent of our population means Oldham could be a great place to base an ambitious, innovative and growing business. But like lots of other places in the UK we've faced challenges as the economy has changed. We need to do something different if our residents are to have the opportunities and successes they deserve. We want every young person in Oldham to know they'll have the chance of a great career without having to leave their hometown. We want to give people options when it's time for a career change, or they'd like to upskill. We want every family to have a decent income, as well as activities and opportunities on the doorstep to boost pride and make Oldham a fun place to live.

That's why I asked Alun Francis, the Principal at Oldham College, to lead a Commission to help us plot a brighter economic future for the borough. We need to make the

most of the great leaders we have in Oldham, and draw on expertise from elsewhere to turn the Government's Levelling Up mantra into a reality.

I'm grateful to the Commissioners for the time and insight they've brought to this process, and look forward to working with them and our valued partners across the borough to translate the vision set out here into reality.



Cllr Arooj Shah
Leader, Oldham Council



ABOUT THE REVIEW

The **Oldham Economic Review** has been undertaken at the request of Oldham Council, with a remit to examine the town's approach to improving its economic prospects.

It has been conducted through a partnership between Oldham College and the University of Manchester, which has helped ensure that the Review has access to the expertise it has required, but has also maintained its independence. Oldham Council contributed toward essential costs and this was matched by the University of Manchester, using CAPE funding. The Review has also leveraged in additional expertise to undertake further research which will help Oldham define and achieve its ambitions.

THE REVIEW BOARD MEMBERS

The Review board has comprised 12 independent members, chosen from a range of public, private and voluntary organisations – in Oldham and its wider environs. It has been chaired by **Alun Francis**, Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College and vice chair, **Rubbi Bhogal Wood**, Director of Wild and Form digital consultancy. **Andy Westwood**, Professor of Government Practice and Vice Dean for Social Responsibility, has led the input from the University side, and other members have included:

- **Bilal Rahman** (Business person, owner of ibreathe and KickSonic)
- **Cath Farrell** (Housing consultant, former CEO of First Choice Homes)
- **Clive Memmott** (Chief Executive, Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce)
- **Donna McLaughlin** (Northern Care Alliance)
- **Emma Barton** (Director of Economy, Oldham Council)
- **John Wrathmell** (Director of Research, Strategy and Economy, Greater Manchester Combined Authority)
- **Kashif Ashraf** (Joint Chair and Founder of Asian Business Leaders)
- **Laura Windsor Welsh** (Oldham Action Together)
- **Richard Jones** (Chair in Materials Physics and Innovation Policy, University of Manchester)

The Review has been undertaken in the style of a parliamentary commission, with the Review board meeting on a monthly basis to hear evidence from national and local expert witnesses, before forming conclusions and making recommendations.

SCHEDULE OF EVIDENCE SESSIONS

21 October 2021		Witness
1	Devolution, from MIER to Towns Fund	Mike Emmerich (Metro Dynamics)
2	Levelling Up Oldham	Will Tanner (Onward) Jen Williams (MEN)
3	GM's strategy, levers and projects	Simon Nokes (GMCA)
4	Oldham's strategy, levers, projects	Emma Barton (Oldham Council)

11 November 2021		
5	Work, Skills and Levelling up	Jonathan Simons (Public First)
6	Breaking Oldham's Low Skills Equilibrium	David Goodhart (Policy Exchange)
7	Oldham's strategy, levers, projects	Jon Bloor (Oldham Council) Neil Thomas (Dudley College)
8	GM's strategy, levers, projects	Gemma Marsh (GMCA)
9	Employer training: what does the data say about good employers?	Stephen Evans (Learning and Work Institute)

25 November 2021		
10	Plan for the North: what do post-industrial places like Oldham do?	Steve Fothergill (Sheffield Hallam University, Industrial Communities Alliance)
11	A Plan for Oldham: underpinned by community wealth building?	Sarah Longlands (Centre for Local Economic Strategies)
12	What does Oldham Make?	Andy Gossage (Ultimate Products)
13	What could Oldham Make? Learnings from national policy initiatives: Industrial Strategy and Innovation	Giles Wilkes (Global Flint) Richard Jones (Innovation GM) Paul Swinney (Centre for Cities)

02 December 2021		
14	Town Centres and High Streets	Cathy Parker (MMU & Institute for Place Management)
15	Housing	Cllr Hannah Roberts (Oldham Council)
16	Crime	Inspector Nick Derbyshire (Greater Manchester Police)
17	Health	Katrina Stephens (Oldham Council)

09 December 2021		
18	Oldham's historic assets: Mills and wider assets	Catherine Dewar (Historic England)

THE POLICY CONTEXT

The Review began in September 2021 with the expectation that the Government's "Levelling Up White Paper"¹ was pending. It was planned for the Oldham Review to complement the direction of travel in the White Paper, as this alongside other local, regional and national policy agendas is likely to have a profound impact on the context in which Oldham will be operating.

The White Paper was delayed and was not published until February 2022, which meant that it was not available until the final phase of the Review was due to complete. There is however, considerable overlap between the method of approach taken in the White Paper, and the approach taken in the Review – with the former considering issues of geographical disparity from the perspective of national systems and policies, while the Review takes a "local" approach, focussing on the options for improving one particular place.

The Review has intentionally mirrored the themes in the Levelling Up White Paper. The aim is to help Oldham be clear about how it might engage positively in the new policy landscape, with a strong focus on the twin themes which have come to characterise the meaning of "levelling up": economic transformation and civic pride.

1. See <https://levellingup.campaign.gov.uk/>

STRUCTURE

The analysis of the Review will be published in the full report, containing the evidence presented by expert witnesses, a more detailed level of analysis, commentary and data.

The document is organised into six chapters, which explore the key challenges for Oldham, organised in terms of the key themes of “levelling up”. This document provides the detail and analysis which the Review board considered in arriving at its conclusions and recommendations.

The chapters are organised in the following order:

CHAPTER 1 Contextualises the problem

The Levelling Up White Paper provides an overview of the history and characteristics which shape and drive economic, social and geographical disparities in the country. This chapter provides an introduction to the way these issues are evident in Oldham, and how they relate to structure of its economy and the decline of some of its main industries. It describes Oldham’s main challenges, provides a summary of key data, and summarises recent trends including where progress has been made in the shaping of its future.

CHAPTER 2 Economic purpose

The White Paper sets out five pillars through which it intends to drive levelling up policy, alongside a set of six capitals and twelve policy ‘missions’. However, it is also clear about the ultimate destination, which is to create a “new model of economic growth, public and private investment and a high skill, high wage economy”. While successful places require strong public services and have a clear role for community and voluntary activity, the focus of policy is on “supporting the private sector” as the “real engine of wealth creation – to invest more, grow more and take more risks”. This chapter discusses the core challenge of defining Oldham’s economic purpose and why having a clear and relentless commitment to this is important in driving change over the long term.

CHAPTER 3 Business and Innovation

Improving productivity, pay and living standards are a core theme and objective of the White Paper, with a strong emphasis on growing the private sector, especially through business innovation and improving infrastructure such as transport and digital connectivity. This chapter focusses on the importance of private sector growth in Oldham and the role of private, public and voluntary sector partners in supporting employment and local enterprise.

CHAPTER 4 Skills and Jobs

Opportunities and improved public services, with a particular emphasis on education and skills, are central to the White Paper proposals. This chapter focusses primarily on skills, and the issues which Oldham needs to solve, in order to fulfil its ambitions.

CHAPTER 5 Civic Pride and ‘a Sense of Place’

The White Paper focusses a great deal of attention on restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, particularly around town centre regeneration, housing and crime. This chapter focusses on the related theme of ‘social fabric’, the role of ‘community wealth building’ and the importance of the town centre and the borough’s high streets and the role of civic pride within Oldham.

CHAPTER 6 Institutions

The White Paper makes very clear recommendations about systems for delivering change, alongside the importance of local institutions, capacity and clear “missions” and targets which provide a focus for action and a source of accountability. This chapter focusses on the systems for delivery within Oldham, as part of Greater Manchester, and what can be done to improve these.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

The starting point of this Review is that Oldham must establish a clear and shared sense of its longer term aims and ambitions as a place. These need to drive public, private and voluntary/community activity in Oldham itself, and also need to be the basis on which Oldham engages productively with neighbouring places as well as with the Greater Manchester city-region and with Government and its agencies at a national level.

It is also a defining principle of this Review that Oldham's aims and ambitions should focus on its long term transformation. The challenges which Oldham faces are many, but have their origins in structural changes in the economy, brought about by deindustrialisation and the shift to a new economy dominated by services rather than manufacturing. Without a clear and shared sense of the future shape of the town within this new context, it is difficult to marshal and coordinate the efforts of local stakeholders or to strongly articulate the needs of the place and its people within wider partnerships, either sub-regionally or nationally.

The Levelling Up White Paper

The Review echoes many of the themes and ideas recently published in the White Paper, "Levelling Up the United Kingdom" (LUWP). This was published during the final phase of the Review process and although it is not yet policy (it is subject to consultation), provides an indication of the likely policy context within which Oldham's leaders and institutions will be working at least for the next few years. There will be plenty of debates and arguments around how to resource and fund this approach, but we are not concerned with this level of detail in this Review. The focus of this Review is on the method and analysis. The LUWP sets out a useful framework within which Government can work with different places to address geographical disparities, with a focus on economic transformation and the renewal of civic pride. We think this framework also applies well to our own thinking and for Oldham as a whole. It is a good starting point, which must be built on in the future, if change is really going to happen.

The LUWP presents a clear analysis of the long-term economic changes which underpin geographical disparities. However, it recognises that the issues are not "simply economic". The framework which it proposes to evaluate those disparities recognises the interconnection between six related, but distinct, forms of capital. Alongside financial, physical and human capital, it recognises the role of intangible capital (a critical aspect of the new economy recognising the importance of R&D and innovation), as well as social and institutional capital – which are key to understanding the twin roles of civic pride and social fabric and Oldham's institutions and their collective capacity in shaping successful places. It presents a

cogent analysis of the way that deficiencies in one or more forms of the six capitals are evident in places which underperform, such that they become caught in a vicious cycle of persistently worse outcomes².

The LUWP is also helpful in the way that it proposes to address the long-term challenges of "levelling up". It does not seek to provide an "economic plan" for the country, but a framework within which resources can be devolved to local level, with a clear sense of purpose and achievable targets against which to focus efforts and measure success. These missions and targets focus on improving productivity, pay and living standards; spreading opportunities (with a focus on education, skills and health); and restoring a sense of community, pride and belonging. There is confidence in the role that public policy can play in coordinating efforts around these missions, in order to deliver economic transformation and a renewal of civic pride for people and places who are sometimes referred to as "left behind". And there is recognition of the role of local leadership in driving these solutions.

Cities and towns

However, the LUWP is also a reminder and a reinforcement of some of the challenges which Oldham has in establishing a clear identity and strong voice within a larger economic geography. The national Levelling Up strategy takes, as its focal point, the role of cities as the drivers of growth. "Levelling up" is envisaged as a process of devolving resources by building on the existing arrangements in city regions, rather than directly to individual towns or boroughs. In many respects, it aims to build on the foundations set out for devolution in the initial 2014 devolution deal in Greater Manchester. This is the framework within which Oldham has operated since then.

It is important to recognise and address the fact that there is still disagreement amongst some communities and actors that this is the best approach for places like Oldham. Nationally, there is a degree of scepticism about the benefits which city-region models of growth bring to surrounding towns and this view has gathered pace since the 2016 Referendum and the 2019 General Election. Indeed, the fact that previous approaches to regional disparities have not always delivered for everyone has been the major theme of policy in the last five years or so – enhanced by new economic and social consequences from Austerity, Brexit and Covid-19. This has been reflected in the changing status of towns within policy and public and political debate, particularly in the last five years. They have increasingly been seen less as an adjunct of neighbouring cities, and more as places in their own right.³ This has been reflected in funding streams such as the 'Towns' and 'Future High Street Funds' as well as 'Levelling Up Funds', which have been allocated directly to Oldham and places like it, rather than through intermediaries, such as combined authorities.

2. See Levelling Up White Paper (2022), page 88

3. See David Goodhart (2017) "The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics" and Centre for Towns (2017) Launch Briefing <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports/reports/launch-briefing>.

In many respects, the LUWP shifts the focus of policy back from a direct focus on individual places, to the wider economic units of which they are a part. It reasserts the model of economic renewal which focusses on cities and city-regions as the engines of growth. This Review is broadly supportive of this model. It is realistic to recognise that outer towns are unlikely to thrive independently, unless they position themselves to maximise the benefits of being situated within a larger economic entity. This is particularly the case in terms of private sector growth, which the LUWP identifies, quite rightly as the “real engine of wealth creation”. It also relates to the creation and ongoing importance of new institutions, powers and resources at the city-region level such as the Mayor and the Combined Authority and its family of city-region organisations. Places like Oldham owed their original economic purpose to the fact that they were part of a bigger, sub-regional economic unit. And any new economic purpose is not going to be forged alone, but as part of the drive to foster a stronger private sector across Greater Manchester as a whole.

Spillovers and trickle out?

This Review also acknowledges that much more needs to be done in Oldham and places like it for these benefits and advantages to be fully realised. There is scepticism about some of the ‘spill over’ or ‘trickle out’ effects from city centres and these need to be taken seriously if a new approach to levelling up is going to work and gain public support. This exists across the country, and in outer boroughs in Greater Manchester, including in Oldham.

It is important to consider this in context. Part of the problem is that, despite the progress which cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham and others have made in recent times, they continue to underperform economically compared to both the national averages in various measures and also to similar cities in Europe and North America. The transformation task remains significant and long-term, and the benefits will not be evident for everyone or everywhere in the short-term. However, these benefits do need to be

tangible and evident at some point. It is a measure of the maturity of strategies, partnerships, structures and processes within those devolved authorities, whether they can grasp the complexity of individual place-based needs, within the wider whole. The whole needs to be more than the “sum of the parts”. But the needs of individual “parts” must also be recognised and taken seriously, and not lost – or the “whole” becomes somewhat empty.

Making city led growth work better

Levelling up is clearly not easy, at national or local level, and is swamped in complexity. The question is how to deal with this. It is the firm finding of this Review, that this is best achieved by finding ways of making the model work better, rather than by seeking alternatives to it. A key theme of this Review is that stakeholders should think differently about the way that the benefits of the City-region can be made to work. This is often thought of in terms of spillovers from the core to the periphery, but this is not the only element of the model. There is also much to be gained by collaboration between neighbours in the peripheral areas. But this requires active, sustained effort and co-ordination across multiple partners. It cannot be laissez faire and nor can it be expected to weather the repeated shocks of external events such as the financial crash or the pandemic without help or effort.

It is also important to ensure that Oldham is able to articulate a strong and confident voice within the City-region, making more of its relationships within Greater Manchester and its role in its governance. First it must be clear about its own long-term vision. Second is to place a renewed sense of its economic purpose, as a place, at the centre of that vision. Then there is a need to think this through, as an organising framework, for how Oldham should deal with the issues of productivity, opportunity, civic pride, and institutional capacity.

The recommendations of this review are organised around how Oldham can shape a strategy which builds on these themes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. THE LONG GAME

The Review heard evidence from a variety of witnesses on the wider “levelling up” challenges for Oldham and similar places, the ingredients for success, and the place of Oldham within the wider city region. A key theme was that Oldham needs to establish a clear long-term view of what success might look like. There may be an understandable reluctance to do this, given that so many are variable, external and internal, which can make ambitious missions and targets appear undeliverable and unrealistic. However, just as the Levelling Up White Paper does not seek to set out an economic plan for the country, this Review does not set out a detailed economic plan for Oldham. Instead, our aim has been to focus on general principles, backed up by analysis, systems and policies which are required, in the longer term, to understand the problems that need to be fixed, and to establish a platform to deliver confident, purposeful and optimistic solutions.

The single most important challenge is for Oldham to have a clear and sustained view of the “long game”.

The importance of this is precisely because so many factors will arise which potentially detract, divert or undermine the delivery of long-term change. The geographical disparities described in the LUWP, which particularly (but not exclusively) affect post-industrial towns like Oldham, have deep roots. There are no magic wands which will bring overnight change. It is important therefore to have something clear and systematic to focus on, which ensures that collective efforts do not become dissipated, or wander off course. A central theme in this Review, which is repeatedly echoed in the White Paper – has been that successful places – those which have transformed themselves and rebuilt their civic pride – have been driven by exactly this kind of vision, which they stuck to, and have relentlessly worked to deliver over a long period of time. Manchester city centre is the nearest local example. London Docklands, Barcelona, and Lille are all cited in the White Paper, as is East Germany, and a number of US cities.

This is not because the immediate here and now is not important. It is. It is evident that the short term “shocks” presented by events such as the 2008 financial crisis, “austerity” or the pandemic – and which may now be entering a new iteration due to inflation and war – have a significant impact. One of the features of places like Oldham is that they are not resilient in the face of these events. They are hit harder, and the damage lasts longer, than in other places. However, crisis management can obscure the wider challenge of long-term economic transformation. For Oldham, as for many other former industrial towns, the primary challenge is that it has lost its original economic purpose and has not yet found a convincing alternative. The key to its long-term future is to be clear about what its economic purpose is, bearing in mind the evolving context in which it operates.

2. ECONOMIC PURPOSE

The need for a clear “economic purpose and vision” was a persistent theme during the Review. Defining this is harder than it might seem. Oldham’s original role was relatively simple and easy to understand. It was part of a division of labour and specialisms with neighbouring areas, and its strengths were clear. Cotton and engineering not only provided local employment and wealth, they also helped to establish institutions and a civic pride, from housing through to notable buildings in the town centre, great local projects like Alexandra Park, and amenities such as the sports facilities at Avro. Oldham in the 19th and early 20th century offered a successful example of the LUWP’s ‘six capitals’ coming together to create an upward spiral of wealth, productivity and civic pride. The town ‘worked’.

Oldham’s more recent history has witnessed industrial and manufacturing decline and a decline in the relative levels of wealth within the borough. Accordingly, this has had a direct impact on other issues within Oldham – such as its high streets, its institutions and its social fabric. It is unrealistic to expect the complete substitution of previously strong sectors and institutions with new ones with a similar reach and impact. The future economy and labour market in Oldham (and Greater Manchester) is likely to be more diverse in its sectors, occupations and types of jobs and firms than in the past.

One of the findings of this Review is that up to 70% of current employment in Oldham is within the “foundational economy” (mainly, but not exclusively public sector). While it is important to acknowledge its importance and to improve conditions in this part of the economy, the disproportionate reliance on public sector funding, either through services, grants or central government, as well as on wealth transfers and welfare payments is problematic. It means that in “normal” times, Oldham is heavily dependent on the public or quasi-public sector for much of its activity, and that changes to public sector funding, often outside of Oldham’s direct control, have a disproportionate impact.

The Review has considered Oldham’s economic resilience (the findings are published in the Final Report) and it is not strong. **The economic transformation of Oldham must start by breaking the dependence which it has on the “foundational economy” employment. This should be a central target in reshaping its long-term economic purpose. And Oldham needs to set out clear plans for how it intends to achieve this.**

This is almost certainly going to be multifaceted. There is much to be said for the benefits of “community wealth building” initiatives. These encourage public, voluntary and community sector partners to think and work hard to maximise the impact of the “public pound” in bringing

greater economic and community benefits. It also makes a strong case for the importance of ‘anchor institutions’ and social value in the growth of the economy. This Review acknowledges that Oldham has made some strong recent progress in this respect and makes recommendations as to how this can be further developed and improved.

However, it is important to recognise that this approach, at its best, is only likely to operate at a limited scale⁴ and improve the use of the resources already in the town and will do less to address the fundamental challenge of creating and/or bringing more wealth to Oldham. **For this to be achieved, it must be coupled to a strong and clear strategy for supporting private sector business and employment, particularly in the parts of the economy that can create most wealth and value.**

When this challenge is placed at the centre of Oldham’s long-term vision, it becomes very important to be clear about what parts of the challenge can be met within Oldham’s own boundaries, and what parts require partnerships with neighbouring places and activities.

In terms of productivity and business, it is important to make much more of the successful private sector companies which still exist in Oldham, but also to recognise that much future employment is also likely to be in neighbouring areas. This means focussing efforts not just in Oldham, but also collaboratively with neighbours to support growth, while also working hard to make sure that Oldham residents are equipped to succeed in the wider sub-regional labour market. And this is not just about business and skills (financial, physical and human capital) in isolation. It is about making Oldham a place which is attractive to live in, invest in and visit – a place which all stakeholders can consider with pride. **A recommendation is that Oldham set out a clear statement of its economic purpose, which acknowledges what part of business growth and employment will be delivered in the town and what parts require a reshaping of its relationships to neighbouring areas within the City Region. Missions and targets need to be developed in relation to the restatement of Oldham’s economic purpose.**

This is not a completely new direction for Oldham. There has been considerable progress over the last decade in a number of areas, and there are a number of successes and strengths which can be built on in the future. **It is important, however, that future activity is relentlessly anchored back to the delivery of Oldham’s long-term transformation, that it is organised through a set of coherent sub-strategies, with missions and targets which are directly connected to the delivery of that transformation.** Such an approach will enable Oldham to clearly articulate its long-term ambitions, engage local, sub-regional and national stakeholders around delivering them, and have a clear set of accountabilities and measures to demonstrate progress.

The subsequent recommendations in this Review build on the analysis of long-term vision around economic repurposing, to suggest ways that Oldham can renew its strategy and realign stakeholders around the core levelling up themes of improving productivity; spreading opportunity; and renewing civic pride. It then concludes with a set of recommendations about institutional capacity.

3. BUSINESS AND INNOVATION

The need to grow enterprise and employment through private sector growth both in Oldham, and in partnership with neighbouring boroughs, is a central challenge for “levelling up”. To explore these issues, the Review heard evidence from successful local businesses, and from expert witnesses in the fields of post-industrial towns and their challenges, community wealth building, industrial strategy and innovation. The LUWP correctly identifies the private sector as fundamental to improving economic performance in every part of the country, and sets out proposals to redistribute research and development spending, support innovation accelerators, unlock and spread investment, support SMEs, and improve transport and digital infrastructure. Of these, the focus of this Review has been on measures to support innovation, develop enterprise and engage with business.

It is important to recognise that, although deindustrialisation dominates the story of Oldham’s recent economic history, it continues to be home to a significant number of manufacturing firms as well as successful private enterprises in other fields. More work needs to be undertaken to understand the nature and potential of the manufacturing sector. Different companies are in receipt of support from initiatives to improve manufacturing, such as ‘Made Smarter’, but there is no single umbrella strategy to bring these together and understand their overall impact. **A clear analysis of the opportunities for manufacturing in Oldham and a strategy to support the sector, is a recommendation of this Review.**

Similarly, Oldham is in receipt of a significant amount of business support, for manufacturing and non-manufacturing firms. This is mainly delivered by Greater Manchester partners, but it is not clear how well scrutinised this in terms of its contribution to Oldham’s plans, whether it shares the same specific priorities, or its level of integration with other initiatives. This is important because Oldham hosts its own enterprise initiatives and has an impressive track record of business start-ups. It has a less impressive record, however, in terms of the growth and survival of those new initiatives. There is a need to understand why this is the case, and this involves better understanding the impact of both enterprise activity and business support. **It is recommended that further work be undertaken to examine the impact of enterprise and business support initiatives, and that**

4. See GM Inequalities Commission: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/equalities/independent-inequalities-commission/>

Oldham develops a clear strategy for enterprise, based on sound analysis of what works, in order to prioritise and evaluate the allocation of these resources.

This should moreover, be part of a wider strategy to coordinate work with businesses. In addition to business support and enterprise, Oldham has a range of stakeholders who, in different ways for different reasons (employment schemes, support programmes, skills supply, procurement and so forth) engage with local employers. However, this work is uncoordinated and so it is difficult to assess the size and scale of activity, whether there are gaps, or whether things could be done to improve impact. **It is recommended that, all employer facing partnership work be brought into a single strategic framework, with a clear set of missions and targets around improving productivity, increasing wages and boosting standards of living.**

This part of the challenge is very much about improving the coordination, focus and accountability of initiatives already being delivered within Oldham. It is also evident, however, that Oldham should be outward looking too. It can improve its engagement with neighbours where better support for private sector business is a shared priority. An obvious example, which was discussed extensively and repeatedly in the Review, was around manufacturing – as other boroughs, most notably Rochdale and Tameside, have a similar industrial legacy. The business led Advanced Machinery and Productivity Institute (AMPI) in Rochdale has become a focal point of Greater Manchester’s “Northern Gateway” plans. Oldham has not actively engaged in this project, but a strong recommendation of this Review is that it should.

It is recommended that Oldham proactively engages with neighbouring authorities in the Northern Gateway, and in particular the AMPI project to support manufacturing. There are considerable benefits to be gained by having a shared approach to manufacturing support across the North East of Greater Manchester, and in putting the joint strategies (planning, business support, skills) to maximise the impact of these initiatives across a broader geography.

A related theme is innovation and the potential for Oldham to pilot new initiatives to support innovation in the borough and in Greater Manchester. The new Innovation GM network is led by business and universities and is seeking to strengthen the links between research and development and to support the business application of inventions and innovations. Oldham does not have a university, but does have a further education college with a strong partnership with the University of Manchester, which is helping to lead Innovation GM. A proposed part of this project is to champion innovation in businesses across all sectors and at all levels, and a town centre pilot based in Oldham would help test this area of work which, within Greater Manchester, is currently underdeveloped.

It is recommended that Oldham seek to play a leading role in extending the emerging innovation network in Greater Manchester, into Oldham town centre, with details around governance, longevity and timescales to be negotiated with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

Finally, there is scope to accelerate and expand work with ‘anchor institutions’ working strategically, through local recruitment, the liberalisation of procurement rules, and a coherent strategy to maximise the impact of major public, voluntary and private partners on local business growth and employment. **It is recommended that a programme of dedicated work to exemplify “best practice” for anchor institutions in this regard, be an outcome of this Review.** It is also recommended that **Oldham develop a broader strategy for social enterprise, and support its social enterprises to proactively engage with Greater Manchester initiatives to build capacity, share and develop expertise in the sector.**

4. SKILLS AND JOBS

The Review heard extensive evidence on education and skills in Oldham, particularly the importance of alternative routes to higher skills for young people and adults, and the need to consider skills demand and the supply of jobs, rather than skills supply in isolation. The Review heard about the national priorities for skills, the challenge of improving low skills and the role of employers in investing in skills. It received a presentation on the Greater Manchester Skills and Work programme, and an excellent account from Dudley College of Technology on the renaissance of further education in their town, which has some similar challenges to Oldham, and the importance of having a strong general further education college to deliver a comprehensive package of skills interventions in post-16 learning.

The LUWP does recognise the central importance of education and skills in improving productivity and spreading prosperity, and makes recommendations to improve outcomes through Education Investment Areas, new post-16 providers with a focus on access to leading universities, a new UK National Academy to provide online tutoring, and a set of measures to improve post-16 skills outcomes. These include Local Skills Improvement Plans, an “in work” progression offer for those on low incomes, and the implementation of existing plans for reform and improve opportunities for adults to upskill and reskill.

The education and skills challenge facing Oldham is large and complex. The Review did not consider pre-16 performance in detail, due to the constraints of time. However, given that the LUWP places considerable emphasis on improving school performance, there are some observations that should be made in passing.

The Review did not closely consider education pre-16, so is not able to make detailed recommendations. Given

that Oldham is likely to become an Education Investment Area, within the Levelling Up proposals, it is important to note some issues in the pre-16 and post-16 phases which are worthy of further consideration. These include close analysis of differential performance across the borough, not just in terms of institutions, but by place, neighbourhood, and families (intergenerational); gaining a better understanding of current performance in terms of progression routes to high skills, including the conventional three year residential degree; a strategy for improving English and maths achievement by 16, including an analysis of the knock-on effect for learners in post-16 settings; and the improvement in performance in terms of qualifications acquired by the age of 19, contrasted with high levels of 16-24 year old unemployment. **It is recommended that these, and related issues around educational underachievement, are considered in future Education Investment Area planning.**

All of these have implications for the area that this Review has considered – which is post-16 learning and adult skills. Between 2005 and 2020 there has been a marked reduction in the numbers of adults who have no qualifications. However, it is not clear that this has made any difference to employment or income patterns. And comparative skills performance at all levels remain low compared to other boroughs, while employment remains a problem. There is a higher proportion of economically inactive residents and above average numbers on incapacity benefit. As with many other indicators, this is not evenly distributed throughout the borough. There is a strong concentration of lower levels of skills achievement, and low incomes, in specific neighbourhoods. Pay levels and household incomes are also low in these places.

A disappointing aspect of the LUWP is that it both undersells the scale of the reforms to further and technical education, and the contribution which they should make to levelling up plans, and underestimates what is needed for further education to maximise its potential impact. This is partly because the LUWP focusses too narrowly on adult skills. This makes sense, insofar as adult skills is the part of the skills system which has already been devolved, and is also the area where, through the Lifetime Guarantee and changes to adult funding rules, the national policy for skills is currently seeking to make a significant difference. However, adult skills policy remains very muddled, with a large number of priorities competing for a limited amount of resource with very little evaluation of impact to help focus efforts. There has been no evaluation of the impact of devolving adult skills, either at national or local level. This is partly, perhaps, because it has had few clear measures of success, either at the level of devolved authorities, or at local authority level. However, the LUWP offers a way to resolve this.

The introduction of the new missions and targets will, in this respect, be a step forward.

It is recommended that Oldham take a lead in setting its own missions and targets for adult learning, with negotiation with local providers (the two main ones are Oldham Council and Oldham College) and the Combined Authority, which will shape the distribution and use of adult funding in the borough to 2030. In so doing, it will need to separate out the local authority's strategic role in setting the aims and ambitions for the transformation of place, with its role as a skills provider. At present, this is confused, and the conflict of interest is neither acknowledged or managed. If this matter can be addressed, and effective targets set, then these can serve to focus local providers and the devolved authority on priorities and hold them collectively to account.

In forming such a plan, however, it will have to deal with the fact that the national targets, set out in the LUWP, may be unambitious compared to the scale of the problem of adult skills. Evidence received by this Review considered data relating to two similar areas – Oldham and Blackpool – and concluded that if these two areas were to improve their adult qualification rates to the national average, they alone would amount to over half of the 80,000 target for adult learners. This may, of course, amount to a claim for a larger allocation of adult funding, either from national or devolved sources. **It is recommended that Oldham's analysis of missions and targets should include its own analysis of the challenge of adult skills, and the levels of investment needed to make the borough competitive in the labour markets of Greater Manchester.** This should form the basis of its ongoing dialogue with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and, through it, to national government too.

Beyond adult skills, the LUWP is very positive about the need to “strengthen locally accessible institutions, notably the national network of further education colleges” and the wider proposals for an employer led skills system, as set out in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill which is currently going through Parliament. This is a welcome recognition of the need for strong further education institutions, because of the role they place in the community, both in terms of skills delivery and their wider contribution. The example of Dudley suggests that this should be a priority for Oldham. Oldham College has followed a similar journey to Dudley, with considerable investment, improvement in the range and quality of provision, and establishing its wider role despite, until recently, and unfavourable policy environment, nationally and locally. **It is recommended that Oldham make a commitment to supporting its general further education to play its full role in the locality, and that it works with Greater Manchester partners and national government to secure this for the long run.**

At the centre of this work should be a clear strategy for delivering of a coherent alternative set of pathways, both work-based and classroom based, for those young people

and adults seeking to progress into careers without following the residential three year degree route. Part of the problem with the approach which the LUWP makes to skills is that it leaves a great deal of positive reforms out of the picture. These reforms, which include T levels, apprenticeships, Level 4 and 5 provision in the classroom and workplace, as well as changes to HE access rules and potential changes below Level 2, amount to a system shift for technical education and training. This should cumulatively provide the “alternative pathways” to high skills which are essential to Oldham’s “levelling up mission”, particularly given it has no university and depends on its FE college to deliver the major part of this system. This perspective on the wider skills system as a whole is often missing from devolved authorities (which tend to only focus on the funds they control and the provision they can commission), so the LUWP was a real opportunity to address what a new skills system might look like at a very local level.

This also means addressing two related issues: first, competition and second employer engagement. In terms of competition, there are a number of providers – in all phases of post-16 delivery – who are potentially working at cross-purposes and it is questionable whether this has always produced the best outcomes. **It is recommended that the strategy for skills should include consideration of the positive and negative impacts of competition between providers throughout the post-16 phase (16-18, adult, apprenticeships and higher education), whether this is helping or hindering the pursuit of more effective provision, and what can be done to improve arrangements.**

In terms of employer engagement, this aspect of technical and professional education and training is often misunderstood and misconceived in policy terms, both locally, regionally and nationally. The LUWP does propose, drawing on proposals in the Skills Bill, to create a stronger relationship between providers and employers through the introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). These are a positive move, but still very experimental. The current pilots are focussed on relatively small areas, and it is not clear that LSIPs would work at the level of a geographical area as big as Greater Manchester. As currently defined, moreover, LSIPs are relatively one dimensional. They conceive the problem of skills as a mismatch between supply and demand, with the plan helping to articulate what employers need, so that skills supply can be reformed to better meet demand. This potentially works well in areas where the economy is strong. In “levelling up” places, however, this is not the case. There is a profound problem of demand, and a need to work with employers in myriad ways to stimulate demand. Skills supply is a key aspect of this – but not just a passive respondent to a fully formed requirement. This makes the relationship between specialist

providers and employers a more profound partnership challenge, with a “two way” street between what is taught and how it is practiced. The current Local Skills Improvement Plans are unlikely to address this issue. **It is recommended therefore, that Oldham adapts the LSIP model, addressing skills supply and demand in a much broader economic context including business support and innovation. As in other LSIP pilots, it is recommended that this work is led through a partnership between Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Oldham College.**

5. CIVIC PRIDE AND ‘A SENSE OF PLACE’

This Review started from the position that improved economic performance, in the sense of stronger businesses, more enterprise, and greater competitiveness in labour markets are all central to Oldham’s future, but that “non-economic” factors are of equal importance in shaping and delivering successful places. The Review board heard evidence from expert witnesses on place management (focussed on town centres), housing, crime, health and civic identity and pride.

One of the reasons why the LUWP marks a step forward, is that it acknowledges the importance of social and institutional capital – and the interaction between them and the four other “capitals” (financial, human, intangible and physical) in order for “levelling up” to have any chance of working. It sets out a series of interventions designed to support the renewal of civic pride and a sense of community. This includes the ‘Shared Prosperity Fund’, which will invest in business and skills, but also communities and place; brownfield regeneration, further measures to improve town centres and high streets, securing access to green space, investing in grassroots sports and culture, introducing a ‘National Youth Guarantee’ and related measures to improve opportunities for young people, measures to relocate the Civil Service, a set of measures to improve housing and investment to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour.

The evidence presented in the Review illustrated the enormous impact of these “social fabric” issues on Oldham. The town centre featured strongly in these discussions, as it has in focus group work with local residents. Its importance is clearly acknowledged in the Council’s ongoing commitment to its redevelopment. This includes projects delivered, such as the Old Town Hall and Leisure Centre, projects in the pipeline such as the relocation of Tommyfields Market and the acquisition of Spindles Shopping Centre, and work taking place through the High Streets Fund and Towns Fund Board.

This is an area where the importance of having and holding to a long-term vision is particularly important, because the funding regime tends to be organised through competitive bidding rounds. This can lead to fragmentation and “pepper potting” of resources – particularly given the number and scale of regeneration

projects needed to complete the town centre's transformation. **It was encouraging that Oldham was actively engaged with the Institute of Place Management, which has produced a diagnostic report on ways that town centre management can be improved and it is recommended that the report is considered and implemented.** It is also encouraging that Oldham has recently strengthened private sector leadership in the Towns Fund Board. **It is recommended that the Council continue to work with partners from all sectors to enhance private sector engagement in the regeneration of the town centre, and increase investment from all sources.** It is also important however, that each and every project has a clear assessment in terms of how and what specifically it contributes to the long-term vision of Oldham, and how it contributes in terms of growing business, increasing employment, or improving Oldham as a place to live or visit. **It is recommended that this assessment is built into all current and future projects, to ensure that their purpose is clear, and their contribution is robust, transparent and accountable to the "long game".**

Housing emerged as one of Oldham's biggest challenges, but also as the single policy area where the strategy already appeared to grasp the complexity of the "long game". The strategy recognises that Oldham has to have very broad appeal – attracting and retaining those with higher incomes and high skills, while also working hard to improve the outcomes for those who do not. One of the enormous challenges for Oldham in improving the supply and variety of housing, is that it has significant constraints in terms of available land. The LUWP commitment to new approaches to developing brownfield sites may help open up possibilities here, and there is a case for Oldham, both in terms of housing and business, considering innovative options for redeveloping heritage provision.

The Review board heard evidence relating to heritage in Oldham and the potential for mill redevelopment. Focus groups confirm that heritage is one of the aspects of Oldham which local residents are most proud of – and that Oldham's industrial past plays a significant role in shaping its current reputation. In evidence relating to heritage – including the legacy of mills in the borough – a key theme was around making more of the past in order to shape the future. This is an area which may be underdeveloped in Oldham's current thinking, given that the town has had a unique place in the history of industrialisation, but there is relatively little for visitors to see which could tell that story. The Council has recently commissioned and is about to launch a strategy for renovating mills. This is a strong basis on which to build a strategy for heritage. **It is recommended that the Council implement a strategy for mill renovation, which could contribute to both business and housing needs, and fit with the wider national ambition to redevelop brownfield sites.** Part of this might be Oldham and university/college

partners bidding (eg through either 'levelling up' and/or 'strength in places' or 'Innovate UK' funding) to set up a brownfield redevelopment pilot, undertake a mill redevelopment as a demonstrator of new technologies and materials (including environmental/net zero), of best practice and a site for future excellence in both high-level skills, apprenticeships and firm innovation. Given the large stock of industrial heritage buildings across the city region and beyond this has the potential to be of regional/national specialisation and significance.

This leaves the challenge of neighbourhoods, which almost certainly sit at the centre of some of the most challenging "levelling up" issues, both within Oldham and nationally. Within Oldham there is a very heavy dependency on social housing, and poor housing stock, particularly in the areas near to the town centre, is a legacy of Oldham's industrial past. It is predominantly red bricked terraced properties, with few larger properties – or newer social housing, often in the same areas. There are a number of challenges around the extent of private landlords in specific neighbourhoods, and new arrivals to Oldham brought through the asylum system, or rehoused by other local authorities, because housing is relatively low cost. These residents are welcome, but often have support needs, and these are left for Oldham to provide. This is particularly challenging in neighbourhoods which already have high levels of concentrated poverty. It is not clear exactly how far this concentration of poverty is linked to the wider challenges of education, skills and health, but initial evidence suggests the link is strong, and that a "neighbourhood effects" approach to improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged may be worth pursuing. Crime and health also have distinct neighbourhood patterns. Crime is a major issue in some communities, and there are particular issues around the general public feeling safe in areas such as the Metrolink and the town centre. Health inequalities appear to mirror the neighbourhood patterns evident for other indicators of poor outcomes. **It is recommended that this issue is explored in further detail, sharing data on education, skills, health and crime, with a view to gaining a better understanding of "neighbourhood effects" and designing more coordinated neighbourhood interventions to improve multiple outcomes in an area.**

It is particularly important that this work recognises the different places, geographical disparities and communities within Oldham, and engages voluntary and community institutions, including sports clubs and cultural organisations, in building social capital across Oldham. It should also recognise the key importance of particularly institutions, such as Oldham Colosseum, Oldham Athletic Football Club and Oldham Rugby League Club, as well as grassroots community clubs and cultural organisations – along with the "anchor institutions" which deliver key public services.

It is recommended that Oldham produce a strategic plan to protect and develop its key voluntary, community, cultural and sporting institutions, and a strategy for how they, along with the anchor institutions, can work together to build the foundations of the long-term transformational plan.

6. INSTITUTIONS

As the LUWP recognises, institutional capital and capacity will play a vital part in improving economic and other conditions in Oldham. The Review agrees that Oldham needs to support and strengthen anchor institutions and their role within the borough. These include the Council itself, but also the Hospital and NHS Trust, the College and other institutions in the public, private and voluntary sectors. They need to be more than the sum of the parts and national policy needs to play its part in this support. Furthermore, institutional capacity and the role of anchor institutions also applies to Greater Manchester institutions such as those in the GMCA family that have Oldham in their footprints. They must be better joined up and their efforts and strategies more effectively co-ordinated. All need to own and buy in to the same long-term vision for Oldham.

It is unsurprising that many institutions and strategies within Oldham and Greater Manchester have suffered from fragmentation and poor co-ordination. One factor is that Government that runs too many separate and siloed policy frameworks with little effective joining up. The proliferation of one-off schemes and bidding competitions encourages further duplication and fragmentation – a problem acknowledged by the National Audit Office and the LUWP itself.

However there have also been too many uncoordinated strategies and bodies within Oldham too that have been established in parallel or abandoned along the way. Oldham and GMCA need to make extra effort to co-ordinate policy and strategy and for this to be part of a long term approach. This effort must make practical local sense of the rising numbers of strategies and funding rounds coming from different regeneration and local growth schemes operated nationally. This requires constant effort and grip as well as some rationalisation and clear accountability and transparency.

It requires a new simplified, strategic approach to economic development and levelling up in Oldham.

Neighbouring authorities such as Rochdale have established new economic development agencies and the Review board have been impressed with their ambition and actions (such as the support for AMPI for example). There are also precedents across Greater Manchester in the form of Mayoral Development Corporations, eg in Stockport, where high profile chairs and additional capacity are helping to drive long term strategies and individual projects.

Oldham should learn from these vehicles and adopt a similar approach, streamlining existing decision-making structures, creating new capacity and supporting its long-term economic vision by creating a single structure. It must rationalise previous and current activities and strategies to provide a single direction where the vision is set and maintained. It also needs to be the place where relationships with Greater Manchester agencies and institutions are governed too. Oldham Council is already in the process of rejuvenating its partnership structures.

It is recommended that this include deciding how best to take forward the key recommendations of this Review, in terms of business and innovation, skills and civic pride and how the collective partnerships will build capacity to deliver “levelling up”.

Whatever the specific model adopted, **it is recommended that the Council establish a “Levelling Up Board”, to oversee the delivery of a coherent Oldham plan, with detailed missions and targets to 2030, which can be used to oversee the work in Oldham, the work with City Region partners, and which can produce an annual progress report, which can be used as a basis for assessing the success of “levelling up” initiatives locally.**

It is also recommended that the Council work with Greater Manchester partners to ensure transparency about the investment of resources and expertise into Oldham and the impact of these on Oldham’s levelling up vision for 2030.

And it is recommended that the Council and Oldham Leadership Board consider building on this Review, by working with the University and the college, and other key institutions, to develop a bespoke leadership and training programme, to build capacity and expertise and to focus the “common purpose” of all stakeholders around the 2030 vision for Oldham.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE LONG GAME

Oldham must set out its long term ambitions and aspirations, with missions and targets, for the aims and ambitions for Oldham through to 2030.

ECONOMIC PURPOSE

- Breaking Oldham’s dependence on “foundational economy” employment should be a central target in reshaping its long-term economic purpose. And Oldham needs to set out clear plans for how it intends to achieve this.
- Relentlessly anchor all future activity and projects back to the delivery of Oldham’s long-term transformation, that it is organised through a set of coherent sub-strategies, with missions and targets which are directly connected to the delivery of that transformation.

BUSINESS AND INNOVATION

- A clear strategy for productivity and business, which includes manufacturing, business support, enterprise and innovation, all within a single strategic framework, with a clear set of missions and targets around improving productivity, increasing wages and boosting standards of living.
- Proactive engagement with neighbouring authorities in the Northern Gateway, and in particular the AMPI project to support manufacturing.
- Liaise with Innovation GM for Oldham to play a leading role in extending the emerging innovation network in Greater Manchester, into Oldham town centre.
- Develop a “best practice” programme for anchor institutions.
- Develop a broader strategy for social enterprise, including its engagement with Greater Manchester initiatives to build capacity, share and develop expertise.

INSTITUTIONS

- Recognise the mutual importance of the six capitals in driving improvements and develop a strategy to capacity build and support key institutions.
- Set up a new overarching ‘levelling up’ board, with independent representation, to oversee the delivery of the 2030 vision, with clear reporting around the local “levelling up” Missions and targets, back to the Council and Oldham Leadership Board.
- Work with Greater Manchester partners to ensure transparency about the investment of resources and expertise into Oldham and the impact of these on Oldham’s levelling up vision for 2030.
- Work with the University and the college, and other key institutions, to develop a bespoke leadership and training programme, to focus the “common purpose” of all stakeholders around the 2030 vision for Oldham.



SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

SKILLS AND JOBS


- Take a lead in setting the missions and targets for adult skills, with negotiation with local providers (the two main ones are Oldham Council and Oldham College) and GMCA, which will shape the use of adult funding in the borough to 2030. This should include its own analysis of the challenge of adult skills, and the levels of investment needed to make the borough competitive in the labour markets of Greater Manchester.
- Capacity build its general further education college to maximise its impact, including the delivery of a coherent alternative set of pathways, both work-based and classroom based, for those young people and adults seeking to progress into careers outside of the residential three year degree route, should be a clear policy priority.
- Undertake a review of post-16 provision which assesses the positive and negative impacts of competition between providers throughout the post-16 phase (16-18, adult, apprenticeships and higher education), whether this is helping or hindering the pursuit of more effective provision, and what can be done to improve collective impact.
- Oldham should pilot and adapted the LSIP model, addressing skills supply and demand in a much broader economic context including business support and innovation. It recommended that this work is led through a partnership between Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Oldham College.



CIVIC PRIDE AND 'A SENSE OF PLACE'

- Receive and act on the Institute for Place Management diagnostic report on ways that town centre management can be improved.
- Continue to work with partners from all sectors to enhance private sector engagement in the regeneration of the town centre, and increase investment from all sources.
- An assessment is built into all current and future projects, to ensure that their purpose is clear, and their contribution is robust, transparent and accountable to the "long game".
- Build on the mill strategy to a brownfield mill redevelopment project as a demonstrator of new technologies and materials (including environmental/net zero) of best practice and a site for future excellence in both high-level skills, apprenticeships and firm innovation.
- Review the potential for a stronger neighbourhood approach to those areas where multiple indicators – education, skills, health and crime – appear to overlap and consider focussed partnerships to test out new approaches to improvement.
- Develop a strategic plan to protect and develop its key voluntary, community, cultural and sporting institutions, and a strategy for how they, along with the anchor institutions, can work together to build the foundations of the long-term transformational plan.





The report was published on 23 March 2022 and can be cited as Levelling Up Oldham: the Oldham Economic Review of Economic Transformation and Civic Pride (2022) Oldham Economic Review Board.

This report is the analysis and recommendations of the Review board collectively and does not necessarily represent the views of individual commissioners or their organisations. Within the limited capacity and time of the Review, robust efforts have been made to limit errors and omission including linking source material to encourage transparency.

The Review would like to thank Oldham Council for commissioning this independent report and for providing seed funding of £15,000, technical assistance through Jonathan Downs, Guy Parker, Mahmuda Khanom and maintaining the Review website (www.oerb.org.uk). The Review was also supported by the University of Manchester through the CAPE project with assistance from Dr Marianne Sensier and Jay Amin. Secretariat was provided by Oldham College who also hosted the Review Board meetings.

Special thanks go to the Witnesses who provided invaluable and thought-provoking insight as seen throughout the report. We are also very grateful to the think tank Onward who worked in partnership with the Review to provide in-depth research through focus groups in Oldham and Action Together Oldham for convening an engagement session with the local Community and Voluntary Sector.

LEVELLING UP OLDHAM

The Oldham Economic Review of
Economic Transformation and Civic Pride

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A copy of the full report is available from

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MARCH 2022