

# Cabinet Report of Finance and Corporate Resources Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Abdul Jabbar MBE, Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Resources

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

## Finance

The Autumn Statement proved very disappointing with little new money for local government included. Adjustments to business rates will complicate the settlement, but it will not significantly affect the funding that is received by local authorities.

No new funding has been announced for local authorities beyond the increases that were already in our MTFP model, despite inflation eating into local government's funding allocations. Social care grant allocations for 2024-25 that were announced in the 2022 Autumn Statement have been confirmed. Other aspects of the settlement will be confirmed next month.

We will continue to work up savings options given the likelihood that our funding will be cut in real terms, despite the increases in demands for our services outlined last month.

The projected deficit for the year for the Council is forecast at over £14million 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.

On a more positive note, our 2021/22 accounts were finally signed off by the auditors earlier this month. At this present time, we are the only Council in GM to achieve an Audited opinion for the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts. Our 2022/23 accounts are nearing the final stages of the Audit and will be completed once the relevant information is received from the GM Pension Fund around one outstanding query which affects all Greater Manchester authorities.

## HR and Organisational Development

On Friday 24 November Oldham Council gained GM Good Employment Charter accreditation. In order to gain accreditation we had to demonstrate evidence that we met seven key requirements; providing secure work, providing flexible work, paying the real living wage, engaging and involving employees, fair, legal and ethical recruitment, clear organisational values and behaviours and policies and practice that support mental and physical health. This work is just one part of our approach to retention and recruitment.

Agreement on the 2023/24 Local Government Pay Award was reached was reached in early November and will be paid in December's pay.

## Customer Services

Contact Centre demand remains high with complex enquiries coming from residents and an average wait time of around 10 minutes. Additional staff are currently being recruited to cope with demand and reduce waiting times. Access Oldham saw a total of 4,881 residents

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through the door during October, a 9% increase on September and the third successive rise in as many months.

The greatest areas of demand are for Housing Options and Council Tax and Benefits support. Housing Options footfall has increased by 48% since October 2022 while Council Tax and Benefits numbers have remained steady. These two enquiry types make up the majority (73%) of visits to Access Oldham.

### **Cost of Living Response**

The Household Support Fund allocation continues to be delivered with a focus on issuing winter warm packs to residents seeking regular help with the cost of fuel. These packs are tailored to individual needs and include items such as draft excluders, radiator foils, duvets, and low energy cooking items. Payments of £60 fuel support to disabled residents and carers in receipt of council tax reduction have also been issued during November. During December the team will distribute food vouchers to support families with children in receipt of free school meals over the Christmas school holiday break.

The cost-of-living helpline took 1,164 calls in November, compared to October's total of 1,492. The mild autumn meant we have not seen quite the sharp rise in calls we expected but we expect to see more calls over winter as people struggle with energy bills in the colder months.

### **Customer and Digital Experience**

We continue to prepare for the February launch of the resident offer in each District as part of the PBI programme. A communications plan is in place to ensure that we clearly communicate how residents can access support and services from each location in addition to self-service online. Resident Focus training has been developed for staff working in resident facing roles in districts which will be delivered across December and January.

The Digital programme continues to develop in response to demand into the Customer Support Centre and the need to improve the end-to-end resident experience. Projects in Council Tax, Housing and Waste have commenced with delivery phased from Spring 2024 onwards.

Final preparations are being made to launch a device gifting programme for residents in significant need of a device. This forms a key focus of our planned activity for 2024 to reduce the barriers to digital inclusion in Oldham. The scheme will be delivered alongside our existing data and digital skills support offer.

### **Green New Deal**

The programme continues to establish Oldham as an exemplar area for sustainability, energy, carbon reduction, water, and green infrastructure. The largest projects remain the Oldham Town Centre Low Carbon District Heat Network and Wrigley Head Solar Farm. We have submitted a £1.65m funding bid for the next phase of this project and we are currently waiting for confirmation of this news.

I am pleased to confirm that last month saw the first meeting of the Oldham Green New Deal Delivery Group. This group brings together sector experts, local businesses, and partners helping us to drive forward and deliver on our ambitious net zero aspirations. This group will also be the body that helps to move forward with our plans to bring on board a strategic partner helping to deliver green infrastructure across the borough and unlocking significant levels of private sector investment. This in turn will help to create jobs for our residents and supply chain opportunities for our businesses.

**Recommendations:** Council is requested to note the report.