
Report to Children and Young People Scrutiny Board

Children's Services - update on Financial Performance, Improvement Plan and Transformation and Sustainability Programme

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Purpose of the Report

This is an update to a previous report presented to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Board on 20 March 2024 titled 'Children's Services - update on Financial Performance and Improvement Plan' on progress in relation to Children's Social Care improvement plans and financial performance.

Executive Summary

Financial position

The month 4 financial position of Children's Social Care is a forecasted pressure of £12.261m after the planned use of £0.315m of reserves.

Children's Social Care Demand

Children's Social Care continues to experience sustained high volumes and complexity of demand demonstrating the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. Services continue to effectively manage demand and maintain manageable caseloads in a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Achieving Excellence Strategy and Improvement Programme

The successful Getting to Good strategy and improvement programme is being re-launched as 'Achieving Excellence' following the positive outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection. Service leaders across Children's Social Care and Early Help, working with our partners, continue to drive improvement in the quality of our work with vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme

The programme continues to deliver ambitious plans across three strategic areas: earlier support for families, workforce stability and placement sufficiency. The programme is making progress to deliver targets and has direct oversight from the lead member for children and young people.

Children's Services in Oldham are keeping children and young people safe, improving outcomes and are in a strong position to further improve the delivery of timely and effective services to support vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Children and Young People Scrutiny Board notes the report and progress to date.

Children and Young People Scrutiny Board

2 October 2024

1 The current financial position of Children's Social Care

- 1.1 The service continues to experience significant financial pressures in 2024/25. The previous report, to the board in March 2024 reported the financial position at month 9 which at the time was highlighting a pressure of £13.348m. The final 2024/25 position for Children's Social Care was a pressure of £12.123m, with the largest contributor of the pressure being the social care placements, including high-cost external residential packages (£11.612m).

2024/25 Financial Position

- 1.2 The forecasted pressure for Children's Social Care at 30 July 2024 (month 4) is £12.261m and incorporates the use of reserves totaling £0.315m. The table below presents the financial position, by Directorate for Children's Social Care at month 4.

| Children's Social Care | Revised Budget £k | Forecast £k | Use of Reserves £k | Variance M04 £k |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Children in Care | 41,300 | 53,387 | 0 | 12,087 |
| Fieldwork & Family Support | 11,615 | 12,288 | 0 | 673 |
| Children's Safeguarding | 2,902 | 2,757 | 0 | -145 |
| Children's Services- Integration | 3,425 | 3,386 | -315 | -354 |
| Total Children's Social Care | 59,242 | 71,818 | -315 | 12,261 |

- 1.3 The most significant pressure is within **Children in Care**; £12.087 at month 4, in the main it is the result of continued pressure in externally commissioned placements, the table below shows the main contributors to the pressure:

| Placement Pressures | M4 variance £k |
|--|-------------------|
| Out of Borough | 6,081 |
| Semi Independence | 3,544 |
| Secure- Welfare | 1,467 |
| Independent Fostering Agency | 665 |
| Fostering placed with Relatives/ Friends | 510 |
| Total | 12,267 |

In addressing the pressure in the placements budget, senior management are reviewing high-cost external residential packages to mitigate the pressure. At month 4, additional demand on the placements budget for new placements and changes to existing placements equated to £1.442m however, the review mitigated the additional demand by £1.458m resulting in a net reduction of £0.019m.

- 1.4 Fieldwork and Family Support is reporting a pressure of £0.673m, this is staffing related, in the main as a result of the continued use of agency staff.
- 1.5 Children’s Safeguarding is reporting an underspend of £0.145m, this in the main relates to vacant posts.
- 1.6 Children’s Services Integration is reporting an underspend of £0.354m, this in the main relates to vacant posts.

2 Children’s Social Care and Early Help Demand

- 2.1 In line with high levels of demand nationally and in the Northwest, contextual factors such as poverty, deprivation, the pandemic, and cost of living crisis continue to have a significant impact on children and young people in Oldham enjoying a happy, healthy, and safe childhood in their families.
- 2.2 There has been a sustained high level of professionals contacting Children’s Social Care and Early Help for advice and support, since the last report to the board in March 2024, with an associated level in referrals for statutory social work services. This has led to sustained numbers of children and young people across all our cohorts (children in need, children subject to child protection plans, children looked after and care leavers) with 50% additional demand compared to pre-pandemic levels, as demonstrated in the charts below comparing Oldham to our statistical neighbours.



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- 2..3 This high volume and complexity of demand has continued in 2024/25, particularly Children Looked After, which demonstrates the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. In July 2024, there were 2,202 contacts into the MASH with 428 (19%) of these converting to referrals for statutory services. Children's Social Care and Early Help were providing support to 4,017 children and young people including 1,134 open to early help, 1,538 children in need, 490 subject to child protection plans, 603 children looked after and 252 care leavers.

3 Achieving Excellence Strategy and Improvement Programme Update

- 3.1 Children's Services was inspected by Ofsted in May 2024, a significant number of children's cases were scrutinised, and the service has been judged to be 'good' overall and 'good' across all four areas, help and protection, children in care, care leavers and impact of leaders. This puts Oldham in the top 30% nationally and one of three councils in Greater Manchester, demonstrating the strength of the 'Getting to Good' strategy and improvement programme in driving continuous improvement across Children's Social Care and Early Help services since our last inspection.

3.2 Key strengths and progress

We're managing demand, keeping children and young people safe and improving outcomes.

Help and Protection

- Targeted and timely early help support
- Timely and thorough screening of contacts and referrals in the MASH and appropriate out of hours response from the Emergency Duty Team (EDT)
- Prompt multi-agency response to children at risk of significant harm and those who go missing or are at risk of exploitation or homelessness
- Assessments are thorough, plans child-centred and children are visited regularly
- Effective edge of care support provided by the Adolescent Support Unit (ASU)
- Children with SEND benefit from passionate and skilled social workers and family support workers, who are strong advocates for them
- The local authority designated officer (LADO) provides a thorough response to allegations made against adults working with children

Children in Care

- Appropriate decisions to bring children into care
- Children's plans are child-centred and regularly reviewed with children and families
- Children are placed in settled and stable living arrangements
- Children in care benefit from a strong Virtual School
- Strong partnership working with the family courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to achieve positive outcomes for children.
- Foster carers are well supported and receive specialist training
- Strong and effective links between the local authority and the Regional Adoption Agency Adoption Now
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive in Oldham are well supported by experienced and tenacious social workers

Care Leavers

- Care leavers benefit from stable, trusting relationships with their personal advisor (PAs), who are strong advocates for them.
- Effective and co-produced pathway plans that accurately reflect needs
- Effective response from PAs when care leavers are at risk of exploitation

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- Positive emphasis on employment, education and training. PAs support care leavers to achieve their academic or personal aspirations

Impact of leaders

- Family-focused, child-centred practice
- Political and corporate commitment – investment to strengthen the service, provide increased workforce stability and strong corporate parenting duties
- Strong and stable leadership team with a relentless focus on improvement
- Getting to Good programme has created a framework for targeted practice improvement supported by effective performance management tools
- Wide range of support and training and development opportunities for staff

3.3 **Improvement priorities in 2024/25** - following the positive outcome of the inspection, the children's social care and early help strategy and improvement programme are being refreshed and will be re-launched in October 2024 to 'Achieving Excellence' in our ambition to drive continuous improvement, performance monitoring and quality assurance to continue to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families in Oldham.

3.4 The post-inspection improvement plan is underway to enable the service to drive further improvements over the next 12 months across the three strategic priorities. The agile programme approach is continuing, focusing on targeted improvement interventions, through systemic, relational, and strengths-based approaches across key themes, to meet the complex needs of children, young people, and their families, which are outlined below:

Strategic Priority 1: Improving the lives of children and young people through quality social work, working closely with our partners

- **Aim:** To deliver high-quality, consistent child-centered practice that meets the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families through continuous learning and improvement and effective partnerships.
- **Key Actions:**
 - Embed the 7x7x7 practice model to ensure consistent quality of practice across the seven fundamentals.
 - Ensure consistent management oversight of cases and audit actions.
 - Strengthen partnership thresholds at the front door (MASH).
 - Strengthen the response to domestic abuse and neglect.
 - Enhance the oversight and support for young carers.
 - Strengthen permanence planning.
 - Strengthen the quality of return home interviews for children that go missing from home or care.
 - Transitions from children in care to care leavers and to adult services.
 - Empower care leavers to achieve better educational, employment, and training outcomes.

Strategic Priority 2: A stable and permanent workforce committed to Oldham

- **Aim:** To have a stable, skilled, and empowered workforce who feel valued, receive high challenge and high support built around a learning culture who are proud to work for Oldham Council.
- **Key Actions:**
 - Implement strategies to recruit and retain staff and convert agency roles.
 - Drive professional development and career progression.
 - Provide comprehensive training and support for practitioners.
 - Provide regular, effective supervision and support to our staff.
 - Foster a positive working culture with recognition and well-being initiatives.
 - Promote equality, diversity, and inclusion by embedding inclusive practices.

Strategic Priority 3: A local home for every child in care

- **Aim:** To ensure that every child in care has a safe, secure, stable, and caring home, close to their family and friends, their school, and their community,
- **Key Actions:**
 - Deliver six Mockingbird constellations to support placement stability.
 - Increase the number of mainstream and kinship foster carers.
 - Open new internal children's homes within the borough to support placement sufficiency.
 - Support more Care Leavers into independent living through innovative accommodation solutions.
 - Commission local fostering, residential, and semi-independent placements through effective market management.

3.5 The Achieving Excellence improvement plan will be reviewed quarterly, enabling leaders to assess and evidence progress and make informed adjustments that will drive further improvements to deliver positive outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, and families in Oldham.

4 Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme update

4.1 The children's investment plan, sets the mandate for delivering ambitious plans through the **transformation and sustainability programme** across three strategic areas:

- **Earlier support for families:** delivering more support for families, at an earlier stage, without needing intensive support from statutory services through an integrated model of family help
- **Workforce stability:** making Oldham a great place to work with children and young people by recruiting and retaining great social workers and managers through a 'grow our own' workforce model.
- **Placement sufficiency:** providing a stable home for every child in our care by increasing the number of council foster carers, residential provision, local externally commissioned placements and securing suitable accommodation for over 18s.

4.3 Workstream progress and impact are outlined below:

Strand 1: Earlier Support for Families

- All family hubs are open with increased services being delivered as part of the integrated family help model, which include speech and language therapy (SaLT) clinics and parent and baby groups for care leavers. We are further extending our outreach offer by commissioning services through the VCFSE sector. These services are working with families in their homes and a range of family friendly community venues including hubs, hospitals, clinics, schools and libraries.
- To raise the profile of Family Hubs with communities and families a bus and billboard advertising campaign has been implemented which has covered 22 bus rears and 70 bus interiors.
- There has been a recent reduction in the re-referral rate into children's services based on families that have received targeted early help support. This has been associated with fewer children escalating into children's social care in the 6 months following targeted early help involvement.

Strand 2: Workforce Stability

- The service continues to make progress in securing a stable and permanent workforce and reducing the use of agency workers through the successful 'grow our own' social work model and 'Choose Oldham' recruitment campaign. Social worker agency numbers have continued to reduce from 36% in April 2024 to 32% in July 2024. This will reduce further in September and October as a new group of newly qualified social workers are supported into their first year of employment, which will release a number of agency social workers.
- As part of the delivery of new residential children's homes, the service is developing a recruitment and retention strategy to staff the homes with suitable and experienced residential childcare workers and managers to ensure high quality provision for our young people.

Strand 3: Placement Sufficiency

Foster Care

- There are 310 children placed in internal fostering which is an increase of 13 internal placements since May 2024, and an indication of how the service is stretching our foster carers to ensure children are placed in a stable and caring family home.
- The first specialist foster care 'Mockingbird' hub that opened in March 2024 has been successful in supporting 16 children and young people to remain in placements with

their foster carers providing stability and contributing to managing the significant placement costs which, if the placements had broken down, the children would most likely be placed in high cost placements. We are on track to open the second hub in October 2024.

Residential Placements, supported accommodation and independent living

- Plans are progressing well to open three new internal children's homes. Royton Children's Home is at the stage of refurbishment tender to procure a construction provider and remains on track for April 2025 opening. One property in St James has been identified and an offer has been accepted by the seller which is progressing through legal services and remains on track for April 2025 opening. A third property has been identified in Royton going through due diligence prior to an offer being submitted, this is forecasted to open in quarter 1 2025.
- 17 new semi-independent beds for Oldham young people aged 16 plus through collaborative working with private providers.
- We continue to develop our offer for young people aged over 18 who are appealing Home Office decisions to remain and are without recourse to public funds during the process. We have established a partnership with a local private provider under the Placement Northwest Framework with one property open in Werneth and further properties in development.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Service leaders continue to effectively manage high demand for children's services in Oldham, maintaining manageable caseloads to an average of 19, through the recruitment and retention of social workers and managers, to be able to provide timely and intensive support and intervention work with children, young people, and families. There is a stable senior leadership team driving ambitious and innovative transformation within a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
- 5.2 Council-wide strategies such as place-based integration in local communities and an increased focus on early intervention and prevention seeks to address the high levels of demand for statutory services. Additionally, through the delivery of the Achieving Excellence programme, and Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme, Children's Services in Oldham are keeping children and young people safe, improving outcomes and are in a strong position to further improve the delivery of timely and effective services to vulnerable children, young people and their families.