
Report to COUNCIL – 18th December 2024



Oldham
Council

Portfolio Report

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Abdul Jabbar, Deputy Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Value for Money and Sustainability

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

Financial Position

As I have highlighted in previous reports, the Council continues to operate in an extremely challenging financial position, driven primarily by increasing demand for services such as social care and temporary accommodation. At month 7 the impact of these demands were translating through into an overspend against the approved budget of £19m. A huge amount of work has been undertaken to address the overspend which Members will recall as projected to reach £26m at quarter one. Work will continue throughout the rest of the year to seek further mitigations to reduce the in year position.

I am pleased to report that the Government has made additional resources available to support local government in 2025/26. This includes an additional £1.3bn for local government. Details are yet to be provided as to how this extra funding will be distributed but there is a strong expectation – supported by the Policy Statement issued on 28th November - that a higher proportion than recent years will be allocated to high needs authorities such as Oldham.

Moreover, government has indicated there is to be a reform of the way funding is allocated across the local government sector and a return to multi-year settlement from 2026-27. This can only benefit Council's such as Oldham that have a low tax base but high needs compared to most other local authorities. Nevertheless, the task to set a balanced budget for 2025/25 remains an enormous challenge. An update was provided to Cabinet on 16th December that set out the further savings and difficult decision that must be made. These will be finalised in the coming weeks before being presented to Scrutiny Board on 29th January.

Revenues & Benefits

Work continues to expand the number of online forms available via GovTech, creating more efficiencies in back-office processing and improving the customer journey. Business rates in-year collection at the end of October is 0.65% ahead of the same period last year. As we enter the winter period, and the cost of living continues to bite, collection of council tax becomes more challenging, however in-year collection remains on target, with performance ahead of our closest GM neighbours at the end of October.

We also continue to promote uptake of pension credit for eligible residents. By claiming this benefit residents also qualify for this year's Winter Fuel Payment (Pension Age Winter Heating Payment in Scotland). This year's deadline is 21 December 2024, so we've been doing everything we can to reach people and make them aware. Promotion has taken place via leafleting, information placed in our public buildings such as libraries and town halls, social media promotion, press and through our customer service teams who are meeting residents if they require any assistance in their applications.

Climate Change & Green New Deal:

Vital Energi have supported the Council to submit an application to the Planning service to discharge a number of Planning Conditions which if approved will enable the Council to commence works on site for Wrigley Head Solar Farm by the Planning Permission deadline of 17th December. Details of the grid connection are still being finalised with Electricity North West.

Arcadis continue to prepare an Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Strategy for Oldham, and this is expected to be complete by December / January. Cabinet Members are being invited to participate in the workshops.

Oldham Low Carbon District Heat Network: Buro Happold are preparing to deliver the next stage of feasibility (RIBA Stage 3 design) for the town centre low carbon heat network, and a Request for Information has been sent to all key stakeholders. This work will feed into the procurement in 2025 of the Oldham Green New Deal Delivery Partner as the heat network will be the 'anchor' project for the procurement. Further to a recent Press Release, DESNZ have confirmed that Oldham remains part of the national Advanced Zoning Programme which will enable Oldham to take advantage of new primary and secondary legislation around heat network zoning. Work will take place over the next few months to establish what improvements are required for Council buildings to prepare them to connect to the future heat network.

- **IT & Digital:** Over the past three months, IT has been delivering key projects to support the council's transition to a digitally enabled local authority:
- **Cloud Migration:** IT continues to migrate systems and services to the Cloud which will aid in decanting all services, systems, network connectivity from the Civic Centre Data Centre, into Spindles.
- **Spindles:** Work continues in preparation for the new Primary IT Comms Rooms in Spindles which are now under construction, whilst the decant of infrastructure from the Civic Centre is now progressing.
- **Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Transition:** Nationally the PSTN will close in 2027 with a requirement to move current connectivity to digital networks. IT are reviewing the output from the audit of all impacted sites across the borough with Properties to prepare for the transition and to assess any upgrades or changes that may be required.
- **GMOne Fibre Network:** The roll out of GM One will provide a single active network available for public services across the region driving efficiency and security. There are now 13 sites live on the new GMOne circuits.
- **New Kit for Staff:** The new Laptop refresh programme has now commenced which will replace c3000 Council staff laptops.
- **The Revenues and Benefits Service system (Academy)** has undergone a major upgrade, including the move of it into Azure. This is now complete and will enhance system performance, security, and scalability
- **Wifi Replacement:** IT have commenced the replacement of our existing network with a newer more modern Wireless Infrastructure. Not only will this help improve security but will help the Council to adhere to Public Service Network security requirements.

Digital Inclusion:

The council has recently submitted a bid to GMCA to fund digital inclusion work across the borough with the aim of increasing access to digital support closer to home. We have been notified that the application was successful and we await a Grant Funding Agreement from GMCA to formalise the funding ahead of delivery commencing in early 2025 through to June 2025.

Recommendations: Council is requested to note the report.