

Report to Children and Young People Scrutiny Board

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

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Shaid Mushtaq, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Officer Contact: Anthony Decrop, Acting Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help

Report Authors: Sheila Garara, Assistant Director Children's Services Integration / Nicola Harrop, Finance Manager

17 June 2025

Purpose of the Report

This is an update to a previous report presented to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Board on 2 October 2024 titled 'Children's Services - update on Financial Performance, Improvement Plan and Transformation and Sustainability Programme' to outline progress in relation to Children's Social Care and Early Help action plans and financial performance.

Executive Summary

Financial position

The 2024/25 outturn position for Children's Social Care is pressure of £12.333m after the planned use of £0.336m 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 Action Plan

Following the launch of the 'Achieving Excellence' strategy and action plan in October 2024, 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, placement sufficiency and digital innovation. 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, managing and reducing demand for statutory intervention and improving outcomes. We 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

17 June 2025

1 The current financial position of Children's Social Care

- 1.1 As in previous years, the service continued to experience significant financial pressures throughout 2024/25. The previous report, to the board in October 2024, reported the financial position at month 4 (July 2024) which at the time highlighted a potential pressure of £12.261m.
- 1.2 The final 2024/25 position for Children's Social Care was a pressure of £12.333m, slightly higher than the £12.125m reported in the final, month 10 financial monitoring report. The table below presents the financial position, by service area for Children's Social Care at 31 March 2025.

	Budget £000	Actual £000	Use of Reserves £000	Variance £000	Variance M10 £000
Children in Care	42,194	53,959	0	11,765	11,370
Fieldwork & Family Support	11,412	12,954	0	1,542	1,647
Children's Safeguarding	3,041	2,795	0	(246)	(210)
Children's Services Integration	3,535	3,143	(336)	(728)	(682)
	60,182	72,851	(336)	12,333	12,125

- 1.3 The most significant pressure is within **Children in Care** which is reporting an overspend of £11.765m. The main pressure relates to the social care placements budget £11.602m, as summarised in the table below, a range of pressures including £0.441m from reduced contributions from Health for joint funded packages are offset by a positive variance in relation to income received to support Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). There were additional pressures in the residential homes and Permanence service due to agency costs which were offset in part by vacancies in other services such as the Adolescent Support Unit and Children with Disabilities team.

Placement Pressures	Outturn Variance £m
Out of Borough	5.869
Semi Independence	3.977
Secure - Welfare	1.126
Independent Fostering Agency	0.795
Fostering including those placed with Relatives/ Friends	1.217
UASC grant	(1.876)
Continuing Health Care funding	0.441
Professional fees	0.052
Total	11.601

The review of the external placements packages in 2024/25 yielded cost reductions of £3.723m however, new placements cost £3.738m; a small increase of £0.015m.

- 1.4 **Fieldwork and Family Support** is reporting a pressure of £1.542m. There continued to be a reliance on agency staff in 2024/25 which cost £5.680m compared with vacant posts of £4.456m. In addition, the service has a pressure of £0.149m in relation to legal and drug testing costs and payments to external care providers.
- 1.5 **Children's Safeguarding** is reporting an underspend of £0.246m. The main underspend is within the Social Work Academy which relates to reduced staffing costs and additional income received (£0.201m).
- 1.6 **Children's Services Integration** is reporting an underspend of £0.728m. The main underspends are in Business Support (£0.418m) and Targeted Youth commissioning due to increased Youth Justice Grant (£0.226m).

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, cost of living, domestic abuse, mental health and neglect 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 October 2024, however referrals for statutory social work services have recently significantly declined, almost to pre-pandemic levels. There are reduced numbers open to early help, sustained numbers of children and young people on children in need plans, reduced numbers on child protection plans and increased numbers of children looked after and care leavers over the past couple of years, as demonstrated in the charts comparing Oldham to our statistical neighbours.



- 2.3 This high volume and complexity of demand has continued into 2025/26, particularly Children Looked After, which demonstrates the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. In April 2025, there were 1,720 contacts into the MASH with 281 (16%) of these converting to referrals for statutory services. Children's Social Care and Early Help were providing support to 3,426 children and young people including 862 open to early help, 1,287 children in need, 424 subject to child protection plans, 589 children looked after and 264 care leavers.

3 Achieving Excellence Strategy and Action Plan Update

- 3.1 Following the Children's Services inspection in May 2024, we've continued a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and families through the launch of the Achieving Excellence in Children's Social Care and Early Help strategy and action plan in October 2024. Our approach prioritises consistently embedding high-quality, child-centred practice and strengthening multi-agency partnerships to ensure that children, young people and their families receive the right support at the right time.
- 3.2 The Achieving Excellence action plan is reviewed quarterly, enabling leaders to assess and evidence progress and make informed adjustments that drive further improvements to deliver positive outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, and families in Oldham.
- 3.3 **Key strengths and progress**

We're managing and reducing demand effectively to keep children and young people safe and have continued the momentum of improvement of our services.

Help and Protection

- **Thresholds and Early Help:** The Oldham Safeguarding Children Partnership (OSCP) reviewed the threshold criteria (Continuum of Need) and shared with partners through briefing sessions. A strengthened early help team in the MASH has improved partner support. Family Hubs have increased accessibility and range of services to support families earlier within their local communities. Early intervention support has helped to reduce referrals to statutory services by 23.8% over the past 12 months, with 85% of families achieving positive outcomes following targeted early help intervention.
- **Domestic Abuse Safety Planning:** Staff confidence has improved through targeted training and quality assurance work. Consistent, high-quality safety planning remains a development priority.
- **Young Carers:** Improved needs identification and information sharing between children's social care and the commissioned provider; with a focus on enhancing case recording and partnership working to identify, engage and support young carers.
- **Neglect:** There is child-centred intervention and protection in response to neglect, supported by training for professionals in identifying neglect at the earliest opportunity. There is partnership focus to further elevate child and adolescent neglect.
- **Child Protection:** Robust oversight has reduced children on plans over 2 years to 1% with improved shared multi-agency accountability of child protection planning.
- **Complex Safeguarding:** Two weeks of action in 2024 engaged 5,000 students and teachers in sessions on sexual exploitation, online safety, peer abuse, and youth violence, with highly positive feedback. There have been 37 arrests in 2024/25 by the Complex Safeguarding Police Team in relation to exploitation and an arrest and charge made in relation to modern day slavery

Children in Care

- **Permanence Planning:** 96% of children have a permanence plan with active consideration of adoption, special guardianship, kinship care, long term foster care and foster to adopt placements. A new Kinship Local Offer is in place.
- **Health Assessments:** The process has been strengthened and management oversight increased. We continue work with health partners to complete within timescales.
- **Placement Sufficiency:** Internal capacity is increasing with new children's homes and more foster carers. The council commitment to direct match Care Leavers to 50% of all available properties is successfully leading to more care leavers living

independently. There is active engagement with local providers to secure placements and we're actively supporting the delivery of the GM RCC and Project Skyline to deliver better commissioning arrangements and 10 new children's homes across GM.

- **Placement Stability:** 56% of children in our care are placed in our own provision which is positive. Multi-agency disruption meetings and support from therapeutic supervising social workers for foster carers and the adolescent support unit help prevent placement breakdowns.
- **Educational Outcomes:** There is strong support via the Virtual School. School attendance is high in primary (95.3%) but lower in secondary (88.6%) with a targeted action plan in place.
- **Life Story Work:** We've developed co-produced practice guidance, later life letters and virtual life story books. Staff training relating to the use of the tools and quality of the content will follow.

Care Leavers

- **Pathway Planning:** A revised approach has been co-produced with young people to align with their aspirations and needs.
- **Transitions:** All care leavers have a dedicated PA from age 17 to develop relationships and promote smooth transitions to post-18 services. A new transitions team has been developed with more work needed for earlier transition planning from age 14 collaboratively with adult social care.
- **EET Support:** 56% of 17–18 year olds and 47% of 19–21 year olds are in education, employment, or training (EET). Barriers include financial support and post-year 13 destinations. A new pre-apprenticeship programme has launched and two care leavers have apprenticeships in the council.

Workforce Stability

- **Stability:** 84% of team managers are permanent. Use of agency social workers has halved to 24.1%. There is a strong student/apprentice and newly qualified social worker pipeline through the 'Grow our Own' model and a positive retention culture.
- **Caseloads:** Average social worker caseloads are manageable at 16.9. 36% of social workers have <15 cases and a further 27% have 15-19 cases.
- **Workforce Development:** Robust learning offer with a focus on domestic abuse safety planning, purposeful intervention and planning, assessment and analysis.

Practice Quality

- **Quality Assurance:** Practice quality and consistency has improved, especially in child's voice, planning and visits. Consistency in assessments and supervision are the areas of focus.
- **Family Engagement:** 91% of practice audits include family involvement. Areas of focus based on family feedback are changes in social worker and communication.

Data and Insights

- **System Developments and Reporting Tools:** We've developed a bespoke centralised data system and dashboards to provide real-time performance tracking for management oversight and significant case management system developments for better recording of key practice areas including out of hours duty, early help, complex safeguarding, domestic abuse and fostering.

3.4 Priorities in 2025

Continuing to build on the progress across the themes outlined above, our priorities include:

- Further strengthening the consistency and quality of practice.

- Further work to embed the Continuum of Need across the partnership as we continue to receive a high number of contacts due to partners seeking support and advice.
- Continued embedding of learning from quality assurance activities.
- Delivery of our local and GM placement sufficiency commitments.
- Further strengthening workforce stability with more permanent workers.
- Transforming our services through the design and implementation of the Families First Partnership Programme exploring our multi-agency approach to family help, child protection and family networks in line with national reforms, supported by diagnostic work with Newtons.

4 Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme Update

4.1 The children's transformation and sustainability programme is delivering ambitious plans across three strategic areas linked to the council pillars of change outlined in the Ready for the Future corporate plan:

- **Earlier Support for Families:** delivering more support for families, at an earlier stage, preventing the need for intensive support from statutory services, through the co-design and implementation of the Families First Partnership Programme in line with national reforms.
- **Placement Sufficiency:** providing a stable home for every child in our care and care leavers by increasing the number of council foster carers, residential provision, local externally commissioned placements and securing suitable accommodation for over 18s care leavers and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).
- **Digital Innovation:** Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to improve efficiency in the delivery of services, reducing administrative tasks to enable more time to directly support children, young people and families.

4.2 Workstream progress and impact are outlined below:

4.2.1 Strand 1: Earlier Support for Families

- The Families First Partnership (FFP) Programme is a national reform to deliver priorities outlined in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill currently going through parliament. A cabinet report outlining the reforms, governance arrangements and required programme resources has been presented on 16 June.
- The FFP Board will commence in June, and terms of reference have been drafted to co-design Family Help, multi-agency child protection teams and family network models in line with the national guidance.
- Partnership engagement briefings with Oldham Safeguarding Children Partnership, secondary schools, cabinet members/Senior Leadership Team.
- We've attended DfE webinars and engaged with pathfinder LAs and other regionals LAs that have started to develop their models of delivery.
- We are taking a phased, no risk approach, particularly in relation to Family Help.
- There continues to be a reduction in referrals and re-referrals into children's services based on families that have received early help and social work support.

4.2.2 Strand 2: Placement Sufficiency

Foster Care

- There are 319 children placed in internal fostering with 123 of these in kinship care, an indication of how the service is stretching our foster carers to ensure children are placed in a stable and caring family home.
- Two specialist foster care 'Mockingbird' hubs are successfully supporting children and young people to remain in placements with their foster carers providing stability and

contributing to managing 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 two more hubs in 2025/26.

- The Fostering Service has a number of recruitment and retention initiatives, including the Step Forward programme, to provide an enhanced allowance to recruit skilled carers to accommodate younger children placed in external residential children's homes.

Residential Placements, Supported Accommodation and Independent Living

- Plans are progressing well to open three new internal children's homes. Blackshaw Lane Children's Home in Crompton (4 placements) is open, following Ofsted registration. Hayle Road in St James (2 placements) has commenced refurbishment work and is on track for September 2025 opening. A third property (2 placements) remains to be identified, with three property options currently being explored, this is forecasted to open in 2026/27.
- Targeted commissioning and market management has created 14 local semi-independent placements (for 16-18 year olds) and 22 local over-18s placements with continued work through fortnightly tracking of externally commissioned placements to reduce placement costs, ensure more children in our care are placed locally and support more Care Leavers into independent living via housing matches and commissioning arrangements.

4.2.3 Strand 3: Digital Innovation

- Children's Services are piloting the use of a bespoke AI tool developed for statutory social work to produce instant minutes of meetings and case supervisions. We're also piloting the use of AI in the production of Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) for children with SEND following assessment. Both projects are in the early stages of testing with the opportunities to extend the use of AI models across council services to improve efficiency.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Service leaders continue to effectively manage and reduce demand for children's services in Oldham, maintaining manageable caseloads to an average of 16.9, 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 with an increased focus on early intervention and prevention in local communities seeks to address the high levels of demand for statutory services. Additionally, through the continued delivery of the Achieving Excellence strategy and action plan, 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.
- 5.3 The overspend position of £12.333m reflects the significant pressures the Children's Service has faced in recent years, mainly as a result of increased external residential costs for Looked After Children and the Council's position reflects the national pressures in the sector. The budget process for 2025/26 took into account the emerging pressures, particularly around Children's Services, however, the continued increase in demand for the service means that the Directorate will need to work hard to contain pressures in 2025/26. Robust monitoring processes are in place and future reports will be brought back to the

Children and Young People Scrutiny Board on the position throughout the 2025/26 financial year.