

Portfolio Report

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Abdul Jabbar, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate Services & Sustainability.

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

Finance: Work is underway to review our current financial support offer to residents to ensure we are resident focused and have a joined-up and outcomes focused offer. This builds on the success of our Pension Credit campaign last winter, which resulted in an additional £2.5 million in Oldham residents' pockets over an average lifetime. The Council's outturn position for 2024/25 was an overspend of £10.155m which is to be funded from general reserves. This position was significantly improved from that reported at Qtr1, which was a projected overspend of £26m. This reduction is due to the implementation of management actions such as recruitment and spend controls, revision to the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy and the receipt of one-off income. As reported throughout the year, the three key areas driving this position have been Adults & Children's Social Care and Temporary Accommodation.

The Statement of Accounts for 2024/25 was published on 30 June in line with the statutory deadline, one of 6 (out of 10) GM authorities to do so. This is a great achievement and could not have been achieved without the hard work and dedication of finance staff and other colleagues across the Council. On 20 June the Government released the consultation paper for Fair Funding Reform. The Council welcomes this consultation and is working on its response which will be submitted by the deadline of 15 August.

Procurement: Procurement Act 23 (PA23) training sessions for staff were carried out. The Commercial Procurement Unit requested pipeline procurement project information from all service areas for high value contracts. To meet the Council's obligations under PA23, pipeline notices for all contracts expected to be over £2m, were published on the Government Central Digital Platform in advance of the deadline of 26 May. The collation of pipeline project information for all values of contracts is underway to progress the next stages of a) future resource planning b) the development of the Council's Contracts Register. Options are being considered for the location of a Contracts Register which includes testing external software solutions.

Work is underway with HR to progressively map out the current interim/consultant situation to ensure the definitions of 'consultant' (subject to formal procurement) and 'interim' (subject to IR35 tax rules) are understood and that in any existing cases, we seek to resolve to a suitable solution reducing Council risk of IR35 or procurement challenge.

Workforce: Graduate recruitment underway for 6 new graduates to join Oldham Council in September as part of our Early Careers Strategy. We've supported Work Experience and Industry Placements through 10 secondary school students. 6 T-Level students from Oldham College successfully completed industry placements. We are preparing to launch the Care Leavers Summer Placement Scheme in partnership with UK Youth, providing six care leavers (16-25) supportive, paid summer placements. Guidance for career-graded roles has been finalised and approved by trade unions. It will be presented to Employment Committee on 15th July for formal approval. This supports clearer progression pathways and greater workforce retention. We have achieved a 76% completion rate for Annual Let's Talk conversations, a substantial improvement from 24% in 2024 demonstrating improved engagement in performance and development dialogue. Staff can now access OCL's Ultimate Gym Package at a discounted rate of £21/month (previously £36) supporting employee health and wellbeing.

We have successfully renewed our Level 2 Disability Confident Badge, evidencing our continued commitment to being an inclusive employer. We have adopted the Greater Manchester People Inclusion Standards, setting a shared regional vision for inclusive workplaces across public service. We are supporting racially diverse and disabled colleagues through the GM Elevate Programme to progress into senior roles, aligned with our talent and EDI priorities.

Revenues and Benefits: The Government has just published the national Council Tax and Business Rate collection rates for 2024/25. Our Council Tax collection rate was slightly down on 2023/24 at 93.28% from 94.11% reflecting increased financial pressures for some households, however Business Rates collection increased to 96.48% from 96.11%.

Collection for the first quarter of 2025/26 is slightly up on the same period last year by 0.15% for Council Tax and 1.22% for Business Rates. We have also seen a reduction in arrears of £1.16m for Council Tax and an increase of £0.1m for Business Rates. The Benefits service is continuing to manage the impact of Universal Credit migration, which has resulted in a higher volume of change in circumstances being reported by DWP. This is placing additional demand on the assessment of Council Tax Reduction claims. We are pleased to announce that Mark Edmondson has joined the team on 1st July as the new Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits and will be taking forward key areas of service development and improvement. He was previously Head of Revenues and Benefits at Ribble Valley Borough Council for 21 years.

Legal & Governance: The Independent Remuneration Panel has made recommendations to Council on members' allowances for 2025/2026; their independent report is on the agenda for this Council meeting. Since the annual meeting of the Council, appointments to committees and outside bodies have been updated on the Council's website, and relevant bodies have been notified. The public consultation to review Polling Districts and Polling Places commenced on 16 June up to 7 July 2025 to ensure as far as reasonable that the Council has accessible and convenient facilities for all voters. Representations will be considered, and a second public consultation on draft proposals will commence 11 July 2025 to 8 August 2025, with final proposals to be considered by the full council at its meeting in September.

IT & Digital: We continue to work with Inclusive Bytes who are setting up a network with currently over 50 Digital Champions and more than 30 Hoot Hubs across the borough to provide access to digital support closer to home. Inclusive Bytes are opening a unit at Spindles on a short-term basis initially over the summer to offer digital support.

Climate Change & Green New Deal: Oldham Green New Deal Partnership is an initiative to establish what will be only the third local authority Strategic Energy Partnership in the UK, after Bristol and Coventry. The Council has recently completed a very successful Market Engagement exercise. Around 100 organisations attended the online engagement event and around 10 responded to the Council's questionnaire and took part in 1-2-1 interviews with Council officers.

Oldham Low Carbon Heat Network - Work continues on the design of the new heat network and the Council is exploring the potential to utilise some of its Green Heat Network Fund Construction Grant to implement heat network infrastructure in the Town Centre as 'early works' alongside the planned regeneration works around the new park and St Mary's Way.

Wrigley Head Solar Farm - The Council continues to work to discharge Planning Conditions associated with the proposed solar farm development in advance of construction. The Council will fence the site in the near term for public safety purposes in advance of the construction phase of the scheme.

Recommendations: Council is requested to note the report.