

## 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 continues to review our current financial support offer to residents to ensure we are resident focused and have a joined-up and outcomes focused offer. Workshops have been held over the summer led by Oldham Positive Action Network (OPAN) to listen to and understand the lived experience of residents experiencing financial crisis. The Council have received notification from the Department of Work and Pensions that the Household Support Fund (HSF) will be replaced with the Crisis and Resilience Fund from 1 April 2026. The Council's approach to utilising the fund will be developed once further information had been made available in due course.

In June 2025, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government issued the Fair Funding Review 2.0 Consultation. This consultation proposed several changes to how Councils are funded from 2026/27 onwards, moving away from one-year settlements and focusing on allocating funding to high needs and low tax base authorities like Oldham. The closing date for this consultation was 15 August 2025, and Oldham submitted a response by the deadline. The outcome of this consultation will be included within the Local Government Finance Settlement expected towards the end of the calendar year.

**Internal Audit and Counter Fraud:** The Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud issued a Limited Assurance opinion on the effectiveness of the Council's systems of governance and internal control for the year 2024/25. The concerns raised in the Head of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud's Annual Opinion Report have been reported to the Council's Leadership and Management Boards, and to the Council's Audit Committee. Action to address the audit recommendations made is already underway. Oversight on progress against management action plans will be monitored throughout the year by regular reports to both Leadership and Management Boards, and to the Audit Committee. Counter fraud activity during the year 2024/25 also identified financial outcomes totalling £448,786.

**Procurement:** PA23 has now been live for 6 months and CPU and the wider Council are positively adjusting to the changes and additional workload demands bought about by the new Regulations. Over the coming months, the priority is to commence the recruitment process for the permanent CPU team now the future workload is better understood. The Contracts Register is in early development stages having gathered pipeline information provided by the service areas. It is expected that the pipeline/Contracts Register will be shared at a future Management Board to provide full visibility of the demands of CPU and to ensure service areas feel adequately supported. This future view of procurement expectations will go on to support the ability to recognise and deliver efficiencies. Work continues with the Growth Hub and Oldham Trading Platform to drive spend with local suppliers.

**Workforce:** We are pleased to share that a permanent Assistant Director of Workforce & Organisational Culture, Eleanor Devlin, joined us at the end of July. Eleanor will lead all operational and strategic HR services and initiatives. A HR & OD ReBuild Plan is under consultation from stakeholders which will highlight specific service risks as outlined in previous audit reports, and a detailed 12-month plan to address gaps in structure, service, knowledge and system. The ambition is to publish in September. Work is underway to support Council's ambition to be a great place to work. Our peer support networks continue to gain traction, with each existing group soon to have a named senior sponsor to act as advocate and feedback loop for each network. The Council have been able to submit 3 successful candidates for the GM Elevate programme, designed to increase diversity at senior level. We continue to make strong progress with our "grow our own"/early careers ambitions. We have had positive feedback from 10 young people who completed our summer work

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experience programme. We have 6 Graduates due to start in September; 3 through national LGA programme, 2 Finance Graduates and one Pathway into Planning.

**Revenues and Benefits:** We continue to make good progress with the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates with both up on last year at the end of Quarter 1. Comparisons with other authorities in the GM benchmarking group show that we were 3rd out of 10 respondents for Council Tax at the end of Quarter 1. Recovery of arrears brought forward in 2025/26 now stands at over £2m for Council Tax and £150k for Business Rates. The Benefits service continues to see high volumes of Universal Credit change in circumstances from DWP but are making efforts to reduce the backlog that has arisen in claims for Council Tax Reduction. The new Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits has been meeting his counterpart from Adult Social Care to discuss the improvement plan that has been put in place and the return of the ASC Financial Assessment team to the Revenues and Benefits service. Progress has recently been made, and it has been agreed that we will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the improvement plan together over the next four weeks to determine if any further action is required. In the first Quarter of 2025, the Welfare Rights Service brought in £830k of which £260k is one off backdated awards. The service continues to support a range of benefit take up campaigns planned for 2025/26 working closely with the Community Engagement Team, Family Intervention and VCFSE to maximise support to our residents. Work has progressed on completing a redesign/restructure of the service, with the intention to commence consultation in September.

**Legal & Governance:** A meeting of the Independent Remuneration Panel took place in August, and their report is on the agenda for Council's consideration. The guidance on declarations of interest is being refreshed and during September it will be issued to members with a request to submit a new declaration of interest form for 2025/2026. The Elections Act 2022 introduced changes to postal vote applications, including having to apply for your postal vote every three years (replacing the previous five-yearly signature refresh process). Over the next few months, we will contact every elector whose postal vote period is due to expire. During September we will be contacting around 12,500 postal voters that are due to renew their postal votes. We are in the final phase of the canvass and door knocking will take place from Thursday 11 September to Sunday 29 September. During this period, canvassers will visit properties in Oldham that have not responded to previous canvass forms, and Elections will also be carrying out telephone canvassing.

**IT & Digital:** We are pleased to share that a Permanent Director of Digital, Matthew Gratton joined us earlier this month. Matthew will lead all Digital, Technology and IT functions ensuring they are fit for purpose and enable our ambitions. Matthew has a wealth of experience and joins us from the London Borough of Southwark. Inclusive Bytes CIC delivered a range of digital activities over the summer from a unit at Spindles including 3D printing, device repair café and digital skills. This was supported by grant funding successfully obtained by the Council via the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

**Climate Change & Green New Deal:** Preparation of tender documents for the Oldham Green New Deal Partner is continuing with a view to publication October / November 2025. The tender documents will incorporate the large quantity of positive feedback the Council received from its Market Engagement exercise. The Low Carbon Heat Network anchor project continues to be developed and the Council is exploring the potential to use some of its Green Heat Network Fund capital grant to implement Early Works in the town centre. The Council is in the final stages of agreeing the contract with its preferred contractor for Wrigley Head Solar Farm with a view to beginning construction in the autumn. The perimeter security fence should be installed the week commencing 8<sup>th</sup> September.

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