

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: The Statement of Accounts for 2024/25 was published by the statutory deadline and our External Auditors, Forvis Mazars LLP have now commenced their audit. Fieldwork testing is progressing well with no significant issues identified, and it is expected that the accounts will be signed off later this calendar year.

The budget challenge for 2025/26 at the end of Month 5 is estimated to be £23.209m (£20.822m at the end of Quarter 1) which is a movement of £2.387m from the position previously reported. Oldham is not an outlier. Several Councils around the country are continuing to battle the cost and demand for essential services. Within GM, there are significant challenges regarding statutory services such as Adult and Children's Social Care. Early management actions have been undertaken with enhanced spending and recruitment controls implemented. It is expected that the impacts of this early action will be shown in future monitoring reports. Given the in-year financial position, the Council is eagerly awaiting the Policy Statement from the Government in early November, and the Provisional Settlement is expected to be released late December.

Revenues and Benefits: We continue to make good progress with the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates both in line with last year at the end of Quarter 2. Recovery of arrears brought forward in 2025/26 now stands at £2.8m for Council Tax. The Accounts Receivable/Payable team are also making good progress with the position at the end of Q2 showing 68.2% of the current year debt collected and over 90% of invoices paid within 30 days.

The Benefits team continues to see high volumes of Universal Credit change in circumstances due to the Department of Work and Pensions programme of migration to Universal Credit. A key focus has been on reducing claim backlogs resulting from migration activity. Claims for Council Tax Reduction have been reduced to 38 and new claims for Housing Benefits reducing to 20 days.

Officers continue to work with colleagues in Adult Social Care to monitor progress with the improvement plan for the Financial Assessment team, and we are pleased to report that the backlog of cases is reducing. We are benchmarking our performance and processes with colleagues across Greater Manchester to identify efficiencies and best practice.

Pension Credit: Our Pension Credit campaign for Autumn 2025 in partnership with Citizens Advice Oldham has started in alignment with the Department for Work and Pensions campaign. 251 residents who may be eligible have received a letter outlining how to apply and the support available. We have followed this up with a phone call to check if any further support is needed with home visits available through the District Team. Communication has also been shared on our social channels encouraging loved ones to support and encourage residents of pension age to claim. My message to residents this Autumn is simple – do not hesitate to claim Pension Credit if you are eligible. There is help available once again to make an application and I urge you to come forward for support.

Digital Inclusion: Last month saw us celebrate Digitober 2025 showcasing the work across Greater Manchester to reduce the digital divide and Get Online Week. We have been raising awareness of the on and offline support we offer across the borough as part of our ambition to drive down the digital divide and become one of the most digitally inclusive towns in the UK. We've also created a digital roadmap that guides residents to all the support and resources they need to get online, including Discover HOOT, Get Online at Your Local Library, and free mobile data packages giving up to 12 months of access. As a result, more residents than ever are able to get online, access

services, and build confidence with digital tools. We continue to work collaboratively with partners to improve Oldham's digital offer, ensuring that even more residents have access to the online services they need to thrive. I have attended alongside officers and Inclusive Bytes CIC at the Greater Manchester Digital Inclusion Summit where I was proud to share our work. Inclusive Bytes continue to deliver range of activities from the Unit at Spindles. I encourage everyone to look at their fantastic offer of engaging activities.

IT and Digital: IT have resumed the deployment of the laptop refresh which now continues to deliver Microsoft Surface devices to staff across services. The Wi-Fi refresh continues across the Borough sites as does the migration of services into the Cloud. Activity in decommissioning the Civic Data Centre continues with the first service being migrated from the Civic into Spindles. IT work in preparing infrastructure required for the readiness of the JR Clynes completed along with IT infrastructure in the second Children's home whilst IT infrastructure work continues in the Spindles Markets, Events and Archives area. Regarding the Waste application then investigations continue to explore how the Bulky Waste collections will be processed with BARTEC.

IT policies are being developed including a new policy for AI which has been reviewed by the Digital Board and is to be reviewed by the Trade Unions. This will then provide a clear framework for all staff in using AI responsibly. A new 5-year IT and Digital Strategy and a Data strategy is also in development.

Climate Change & Green New Deal: The Council has signed the contract with its preferred contractor for Wrigley Head Solar Farm with the team on site ready to begin construction imminently. The perimeter security fence is currently being installed. Preparation of tender documents for the Oldham Green New Deal Partner is continuing with a view to publication January 2026. 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 in the final stages of confirming that it can use some of its Green Heat Network Fund capital grant to implement Early Works in the town centre.

HR & OD: The HR & OD service has published a ReBuild programme to strengthen and transform services. This is based on core pillars of *Strategy, Systems & Infrastructure, Structure, Team Development and Engagement and Governance*. Work also continues to drive the Council's ambition to be a great place to work. Following a series of collaboration sessions, a new staff induction is being launched on 21st November to ensure a consistent and engaging experience for all new starters. Each of our Equity peer support groups is now sponsored by a member of Management Board to provide direction and support for inclusivity. We also continue to drive our ambition to grow our own talent, by welcoming six new Graduates, each bringing fresh ideas and ambitions to make a difference for our communities. We supported the Get Oldham Working Jobs Fair in September with a total of 77 residents registering interest in our apprenticeship programmes, supporting growth and prosperity in the borough.

Governance: The door-to-door (personal canvass) stage of the annual canvass concluded on 29 September, marking the end of the active canvassing period. This phase involved personal visits to households that had not responded to earlier requests for information, in line with statutory requirements. With this stage now complete, the Elections Team is working to process all responses and updates received. This includes verifying and inputting changes to household and individual elector details to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the register. All updates will be finalised in readiness for the publication of the revised electoral register on 1 December. We have concluded our review of members' allowances working with other services in the Resources Directorate, with the findings presented to the Audit Committee. The team has also supported the Independent Remuneration Panel to prepare its report to Council, which on the agenda for this council meeting.

Recommendations: Council is requested to note the report.