

Portfolio Report

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

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

Children's Social Care and Early Help are currently supporting 3,448 children and young people through a range of plans, including 916 receiving early help, 1,378 children in need, 407 subject to child protection plans, 599 children looked after, and 472 care leavers (as of 9 October 2025).

Social Work Services

Within our Duty and Advice service, the conversion rate to referral has remained at 19%, indicating that many contacts are being appropriately managed without progressing to formal referral. Compared to the same period last year, we have seen a 12% reduction in referrals and a 7% reduction in overall contacts, reflecting improved early intervention and triage.

The Complex Safeguarding Hub continues to play a vital role in protecting our most vulnerable young people, 40% relating to child sexual exploitation and 60% to child criminal exploitation. The Hub is actively supporting 132 ongoing police investigations and 12 operations, including Operation Sherwood, which focuses on historic child sexual exploitation. To date, 23 arrests have been made and 8 survivors are engaging with the investigation.

I am proud of the innovative work being undertaken by the team, including the use of virtual reality headsets to educate over 100 young people on decision-making and risk. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and further sessions are planned in schools and residential settings. The recent peer review of the Hub highlighted strengths in trusted relationships, multi-agency working, and family engagement. Areas for development, such as the need for a safeguarding nurse and more strength-based planning, are being addressed through an action plan.

Children in need are supported by a stable social work team to achieve better outcomes. We continue to focus on care planning for children subject to child protection plans and particularly within court proceedings, and I'm pleased to note a reduction in the number of cases exceeding statutory court timescales.

Oldham Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Oldham Safeguarding Children Partnership (OSCP) has been active in promoting awareness and improving responses to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). A CSA Practice Week took place week commencing 13 October, supported by training and resources from the Centre of Expertise. I'm delighted that over 400 practitioners from across the partnership participated in events across the week to highlight this important area of practice with positive feedback received. The Strategic Safeguarding Partnership has reviewed CAMHS waiting times and school attendance for children involved with social care, with plans to develop a strategy to improve attendance. The OSCP annual report has been signed off and will be published shortly.

Corporate Parenting

Internal fostering continues to be well utilised, with 54% of all children looked after placed with Oldham Fostering Service. The commissioning team continue to engage with potential residential providers to ensure quality and sufficiency across the private provider market. Our semi-independent accommodation is full, with planned admissions supporting step-downs from residential care. I am pleased to report that 53% of care leavers aged 18–21 are in education, employment, or training which is an improvement since the last report.

We recently celebrated our foster carers at the annual awards evening, which included a Mayoral Appreciation Award. November is National Care Leavers Month, and a calendar of events is planned to celebrate and support our young people.

On Friday 31st October the Leaving Care service attended Coram Voice's 'A National Voice Awards' in London and won 2nd Place in the category of Participation Awards for the success of the Leaving Care Football Team.

Workforce

Our overall vacancy rate is 18% and agency rate at 10% (19.5% for qualified social workers). We continue to convert agency staff into permanent roles through a strong workforce offer and ensuring compliance with new DfE agency social worker arrangements. We celebrated our social work graduates and newly qualified social workers on 17 October and are planning our annual Children's Services staff celebration for February 2026.

Family Help

Family Help services have seen an increase in referrals following the return to school. The Domestic Abuse team is delivering timely support despite high demand. New arrangements for legal and immigration advice are helping to provide a better service for families with no recourse to public funds.

Early Years

Early Years services are preparing for the Best Start in Life event in November, which will focus on improving outcomes and closing the gap for children eligible for Free School Meals. A successful pilot of the "Talking Tools" speech and language intervention will now be rolled out more widely.

Youth Services

Youth Services continue to deliver 45 sessions per week, including targeted work in areas affected by youth violence. The "Listen to the Earth" anti-hate programme is underway, and new LGBTQ+ sessions have launched in schools. The service has secured funding from #BeeWell for projects focused on girls' physical activity and youth voice.

Finally, the Outdoor and Environmental Education Service has secured £47,500 to deliver outdoor adventures for 390 young people. The Summer HAF programme supported 2,756 children and served over 20,000 meals. I am pleased to confirm that funding was extended to deliver the October Half-Term HAF programme, ensuring continued support for families during the school holidays.

Summary

The Children and Young People Portfolio continues to deliver vital services to support Oldham's children, young people, and families. We have seen notable achievements in workforce stabilisation, innovative safeguarding practice, and improved outcomes for care leavers. Our teams have demonstrated resilience and creativity in responding to sustained high demand and have embraced new approaches such as virtual reality education and youth-led initiatives.

However, challenges remain. Workforce pressures, particularly in safeguarding and care planning, continue to impact service delivery, and we are working hard on continuity for families.

Despite these pressures, the commitment across our services to improve outcomes and ensure children are safe, supported, and able to thrive remains unwavering. I want to thank all staff, partners, and carers for their continued dedication and compassion. Together, we are making a difference in the lives of Oldham's children and young people.

Recommendations: Council is requested to note the report.