

## **Report to Children and Young People Scrutiny Board**

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

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#### **Purpose of the Report**

This is an update to a previous report presented to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Board on 17 June 2025 titled 'Children's Services - update on Financial Performance, Action 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 2025/26 projected month 6 position for Children's Social Care and Early Help is a pressure of £5.278m.

##### **Children's Social Care Demand**

Children's Social Care is experiencing slightly reduced volume but high 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**

Through the delivery of the 'Achieving Excellence' strategy and action plan, 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 enhance 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

27 November 2025

#### 1 The current financial position of Children's Social Care

1.1 As with previous financial years, the service continues to experience significant financial pressures in 2025/26. The previous report, to the board in June 2025, reported the final 2024/25 position for Children's Social Care reported a pressure of £12.333m.

1.2 The projected 2025/26 position at month 6 for Children's Social Care and Early Help is a pressure of £5.278m. The table below presents the financial position, by service area.

	2025/26 Budget £k	Forecast £k	Variance £k
Children in Care	53,231	59,091	5,860
Children's Services Integration	2,445	2,215	(230)
Children's Safeguarding	3,564	3,302	(262)
Fieldwork & Family Support	11,681	12,057	376
Early Help	6,344	5,878	(466)
<b>Children's Social Care &amp; Early Help</b>	<b>77,265</b>	<b>82,543</b>	<b>5,278</b>

1.3 **Children in Care** has the most significant pressure and is reporting a pressure of £5.860m at month 6. The main pressure relates to the social care placements budget £5.332m, which is primarily due to continued pressures in externally commissioned placements and reduced contributions from Health for joint funded packages. There is an additional pressure of £0.307m in the Children with Disability Service (CWD) short breaks budget which relates to direct payments and community independent care packages and a pressure of £0.268m across Residential Services.

The table below shows the main contributors to the placements budget pressure:

Placement Pressures	Month 6 Variance £k
Out of Borough	4,564
Semi Independence	(1,059)
Parent and baby assessment	345
Independent Fostering Agency	(728)
Fostering including those placed with Relatives/ Friends	1,488
Other agency agreements, community placement costs	105

UASC grant	(620)
Continuing Health Care funding	1,355
Other charges including contributions from other local authorities	(118)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,332</b>

The Children's investment plan requires savings of £5.459m to be achieved in 2025-26. The service has continued focused reviews of residential care packages and as at month 6 net savings of £2.607m have been achieved against the plan with a balance of £2.852m to be identified by year end.

Budget reductions for Children's Social Care in 2025-26 are £2.169m. At month 6, £2.006m are green, £0.012m amber and £0.151m red. The red and amber are listed below:

- CHS-BR1-708 Social Work Services (Children's Home) £0.137m - RED
- Increase income at Gemini House £0.014m – RED
- Review short breaks policy and review of in-house provision £0.012m – AMBER

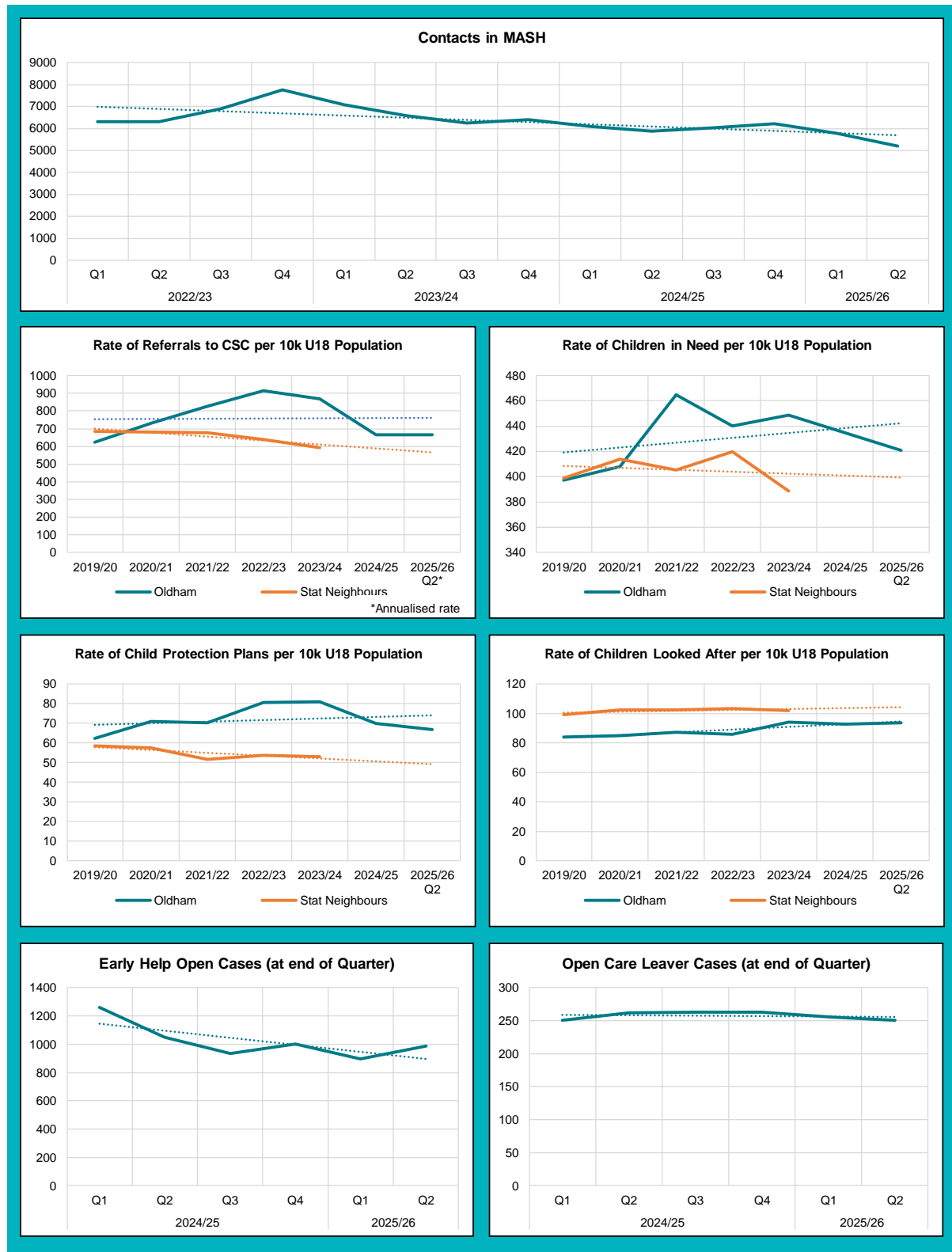
Both the unachieved budget reductions and the gap on the investment plan are contributing factors in the placements budget pressure.

- 1.3 **Fieldwork and Family Support** is reporting a pressure of £0.376m. The service continues to have reliance on agency staff (£0.409m) and a pressure against legal costs (£0.072m) offset by reduced costs in the no recourse to public funds budget (£0.109m).
- 1.5 **Children's Safeguarding** is reporting an underspend of **£0.262m**. There are vacant posts across the service (£0.223m) and increased income in the Social Worker Academy (£0.046m) and OSCB (£0.028m) which is offsetting a slight pressure on non-pay costs.
- 1.6 **Children's Services Integration** is reporting an underspend of **£0.230m**. There are vacant posts within Business Support (£0.035m) and additional Youth Justice and ICB income (£0.197m).
- 1.7 **Early Help** is reporting an underspend of **£0.466m**. There are vacant posts across Early Help and the Family Support Service and underspends on non-pay costs (£0.212m). There is additional grant income for Domestic Abuse and Reducing Parental Conflict (£0.185m) and ICB income for CAMHS backdated to 2024-25 (£0.069m).

## 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 slight reduction in the level of professionals contacting Children's Social Care and Early Help for advice and support, in quarter 2 2025/26, and referrals for statutory social work services have significantly reduced, almost to pre-pandemic levels. There are reduced numbers open to early help, children and young people on children in need plans, and on child protection plans and sustained 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 Whilst overall volume has slightly reduced, complexity of needs continues particularly in Child Protection and Children Looked After, which demonstrates the impact of contextual factors facing families in Oldham. In September 2025, there were 1,871 contacts into the MASH with 364 (19%) of these converting to referrals for statutory services. Children's Social Care and Early Help were providing support to 3,448 children and young people

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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.

### **3 Achieving Excellence Strategy and Action Plan Update**

3.1 Following the Children's Services inspection in July 2025, we've continued a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and families through the delivery of the Achieving Excellence in Children's Social Care and Early Help strategy and action plan. 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, progress and areas of focus**

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

#### **Progress on key areas for improvement identified by Ofsted**

- **Management oversight and supervision:** Quality of reflective supervisions in Audit outcomes has improved and remains a priority. Recent supervision thematic review highlights some good examples of reflective supervision; however, others required more frequency of supervision, focus to be reflection, explicit rationale for decisions, and a reduction on retrospective oversight being recorded. These learning have been shared with managers at the Children's Assurance Board and leaders have completed a supervision deep dive where Assistant Directors are implementing action plans. The QA dashboard enables oversight and tracking of closure of audit actions.
- **Harms outside the home:** Quality assurance processes are in place to regularly review return home interviews for children missing from home or care with the commissioned provider. The form is being amended to improve purpose, quality and impact. A multi-agency Missing Panel has been established to reduce and prevent high risk missing episodes.
- **Life Story Work:** We've developed co-produced practice guidance, later life letters and virtual life story books. Records are written to the child, and managers explain their decision making to the child. Further work is required to consistently evidence life story work through quality assurance arrangements.
- **Children at risk of or who present as homeless:** The joint protocol between housing and children's social care has been updated and re-launched in July 2025. Joint assessments and referrals to advocacy services are now explicitly completed.
- **Safety Planning:** Staff confidence has improved through targeted training and quality assurance work, particularly around domestic abuse safety planning. Consistent, high-quality safety planning and capturing child's voice remains a development priority.

#### **Help and Protection**

- **Thresholds and Early Help:** The revised threshold criteria (Continuum of Need) work with partners has led to a reduction in repeat contacts into the MASH. Family Hubs continue to 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 22.4% over the past 12 months, with 85% of families achieving positive outcomes following targeted early help intervention.

- **Young Carers:** Needs are identified and information shared between children's social care and the commissioned provider through lunch and learn sessions; recording of young carers assessments in the case management system has been established. The focus is on embedding quality assurance processes and establishing a young carers and parents steering group and pilot collaboration sessions at Beever Family Hub to further strengthen localised partnership working to identify, engage and support young carers.
- **Domestic Abuse:** There is a timely response and targeted support for high risk domestic abuse, with ongoing training for practitioners and White Ribbon week from 24 November. We are developing a domestic abuse prevention offer to reduce prevalence.
- **Neglect:** There is child-centred intervention and protection in response to neglect, supported by training for professionals in identifying neglect at the earliest opportunity. The challenge is the low rate of completion of the Graded Care Profile 2 assessment. This will be discussed at the Oldham Safeguarding Children Partnership to explore developing a bespoke tool for Oldham building on the early help neglect checklist.

### Children in Care

- **Permanence Planning:** 95% of children have a permanence plan with active consideration of adoption, special guardianship, kinship care, long term foster care and foster to adopt placements. The permanence policy is to be revised, and multi-agency care planning meetings need to be embedded to ensure permanence is achieved and where not achieved, this is escalated by the IRO through the dispute resolution process.
- **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 has increased 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:** 58% of children in our care are placed in our own provision, which is an improved positive position. Multi-agency disruption meetings, support from therapeutic supervising social workers and Mockingbird hub carers 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 (95.5%) but lower in secondary (88.5%) and special schools (78.3%) with a targeted action plan in place. 2025 Key Stage 2 data indicate an improvement in outcomes across all subject areas and is broadly in line with the combined outcomes from the previous year with 42% achieving expected standard in Reading, Writing and Maths. Outcomes in Key Stage 4 has reduced from 2024 with 13% of children achieving a pass (Grade 4+) in both English and Maths and remains broadly in line for those achieving a Grade 5+ pass (9%). A lower proportion of children looked after were entered for GCSE examinations, with alternatives such as functional skills being used to support young people to achieve an appropriate qualification to support pathways into Post 16 provision.

### Care Leavers

- **Transitions:** All care leavers have a dedicated PA from age 17 with an increasing number of joint supervisions to develop relationships and promote smooth transitions to post-18 services. There are challenges in recruiting to the transitions team which is impacting on earlier transition planning from age 14 collaboratively with adult social care.



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- **EET Support:** 64% of 17–18 year olds and 47% of 19–21 year olds are in education, employment, or training (EET) which is an improving position, particularly for 17-18 years olds. Barriers include financial support and post-year 13 destinations. There are three care leavers undertaking apprenticeships in the council.

#### **Workforce Stability**

- **Stability:** Use of agency social workers has continued to reduce to 19.4% and turnover reduced to 17.1%. 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 17.6. 40% of workers have <15 cases and a further 17% have 15-19 cases.
- **Workforce Development:** There is a robust learning and development offer with a focus on child sexual abuse, safety planning, purposeful intervention and planning, assessment and analysis.

#### **Practice Quality**

- **Quality Assurance:** Practice quality and consistency continue to evidence positive outcomes for children and families, especially in child's voice, planning and visits. Consistency in assessments, supervision, chronologies and multi-agency working are the areas of focus.
- **Family Engagement:** 55% of practice audits include family involvement and 27% include partnership feedback. Areas of focus based on family feedback are changes in social worker and communication.

#### **Systems, Data and Insights**

- **System Developments and Reporting Tools:** We continue to enhance the bespoke centralised data system and dashboards to provide real-time performance tracking for management oversight and intelligence led decision making. Significant case management system developments for better recording of key practice areas include young carers flag, care leavers post 18 and foster carer visits. The focus for system developments includes private fostering, transitions, short breaks and domestic abuse. Staff capacity to develop and test changes and the system upgrade which will be taking place over the coming months are a challenge in progressing these areas of work.

### **3.4 Priorities in 2025/26**

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

- Further strengthening the consistency and quality of practice across the seven fundamentals.
- 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.
- Maintaining and 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.

## **4 Children's Transformation and Sustainability Programme Update**

- 4.1 The children's transformation and sustainability programme delivers 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.
- The FFP Board is driving the governance arrangements and planning across the three core workstreams of Family Help, multi-agency child protection teams and family network models in line with the national guidance.
- Partnership and workforce engagement briefings and events have taken place as part of planning and co-design phases including a successful partnership engagement event at Failsworth Town Hall on 5 November.
- 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. We will be piloting Family Help in the South District, which already has solid foundations with its Family Hubs and targeted early help offers.
- 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 396 children placed in internal fostering with 123 of these in kinship care. This is a positive indication of how the service is utilising our foster carers to ensure children are placed in a stable and caring family home.
- Three 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 a further hub in March 2026.
- The Fostering Service has a number of recruitment and retention initiatives, including the Step Forward in Foster Care programme, providing 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

- We're delivering our commitment to open three new internal children's homes. Blackshaw Lane Children's Home in Crompton (4 placements) is open. Hayle Road in St James (2 placements) has been registered with Ofsted and children will be placed in November/December. Rosary Road in Medlock Vale (2 placements) is at the



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procurement of the refurbishment design stage and is forecasted to be fully operational in 2027/28.

- Targeted commissioning and market management has created 13 local semi-independent placements (for 16-18 year olds), 13 local over-18s commissioned placements and 15 housing direct matches for care leavers, 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.
- First Choice Homes have pledged to deliver a bespoke housing offer for our care leavers which is being launched on 28 November.

#### **4.2.3 Strand 3: Digital Innovation**

- Children's Services are piloting the use of AI tools developed for statutory social work to produce instant minutes of meetings, visits 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 planning stages 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 17.6, 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 The 2025/26 pressure position of £5.278m reflects the significant pressures 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 reflected emerging pressures, particularly around Children's Services, however, the continued increase in demand for the service means that the Directorate will need to continue 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 2025/26 financial position.
- 5.3 Council-wide strategies with an increased focus on early intervention and prevention in local communities seek 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 enhance the delivery of timely and effective services to vulnerable children, young people and their families.