



Oldham
Council

Report to Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Board

Life Course Oral Health Promotion

Portfolio Holder:

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Purpose of the Report

This report provides an overview of the development of a Life Course Approach to Oral Health Promotion in Oldham, to improve oral health for all residents and particularly those who are at a higher risk of tooth decay, tooth loss and mouth cancer.

Recommendations

Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Board is asked to consider Oldham's life course approach to oral health promotion and prevention.

Oral Health

1 Context

- 1.1 Oral health is an important part of overall health and wellbeing across the lifespan. A healthy mouth enables people to eat, speak and socialize freely, whereas poor oral health can cause pain and disrupt sleep, school and work. The consequences of poor oral health, such as missing teeth and visible tooth decay can also impact self-esteem and result in judgement from others.
- 1.2 The three key oral health conditions are tooth decay, gum disease and mouth cancer. All three conditions are largely preventable.
- 1.3 Tooth decay is the most common health condition globally. Reducing the amount and frequency of sugar consumption reduces plaque production. Additionally, toothbrushing helps to remove plaque and prevent damage. Fluoride helps to strengthen teeth and reduce how much plaque is produced.
- 1.4 As well as sugar consumption and poor oral hygiene, gum disease is linked to tobacco use, alcohol consumption, stress and some medical conditions including diabetes. Gum disease can lead to tooth loss and has also been linked to wider health impacts including pre-term birth, heart disease, pneumonia and dementia.
- 1.5 In the UK, around 3000 people die each year due to mouth cancer. It has been estimated that smoking and alcohol consumption are responsible for around three quarters of mouth cancer cases.
- 1.6 There are substantial health inequalities related to oral health, with some groups disproportionately experiencing the impact of poor oral health. These groups include looked after children, young carers, children and adults with learning disabilities, adults in residential care, people experiencing poverty and homelessness, asylum seekers and refugees, people who regularly use drugs and alcohol and people involved in sex work.
- 1.7 The drivers of these inequalities include the following:
- unmet need for support in maintaining a healthy mouth e.g. completing oral hygiene tasks
 - social disadvantage
 - lack of access to basic oral health resources e.g. toothbrush and toothpaste
 - competing priorities/ stressful or chaotic living circumstances
 - direct impact of alcohol and drug use
- 1.8 Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide or commission oral health improvement programmes suitable for the local population, to the extent they consider appropriate.

2. Oral Health in Oldham

2.1 In 2024, more than one in three (36.3%) 5-year-olds in Oldham had visually obvious tooth decay. This is substantially higher than the national average of 22.4% and represents the third highest rate in Greater Manchester.

2.2. Some groups of children in Oldham are more likely to experience tooth decay than others. Data from 2022 showed that more than half of children in the most deprived 20% of 5 year olds had tooth decay, compared to a quarter of children in the least deprived 20%. Similarly, half of Asian or British Asian 5-year-olds had tooth decay compared to a quarter of 5-year-olds of White ethnicity. The highest rate of tooth decay was seen among traveler groups, with more than 8 out of 10 children affected.

2.3 Tooth decay is also an issue for older children and adults. A survey of 11-year-olds in 2023 reported that one in five children had at least one decayed, missing or filled tooth. In 2018, a survey of adults attending a dental appointment in Oldham showed that a third of the people included had active tooth decay.

2.4 Dental decay can result in tooth extraction, which is the most common cause of hospitalization among 5-9-year-olds. In 2024, over 100 children in Oldham were admitted to hospital for tooth extraction under general anesthetic due to tooth decay.

2.5 Mouth care is fundamental to wellbeing among older adults in residential care. Poor oral health can lead to dehydration, undernutrition, speech difficulties, and social withdrawal. If mouth care is neglected, bacteria in the mouth can reach the airways and lead to infections such as pneumonia. From July to December 2024 there were 18 confirmed cases of aspiration pneumonia among care home residents in Oldham. Research shows that oral care can prevent up to 40% cases of aspiration pneumonia in residential care homes.

2.6 Although research indicates that population groups listed above are more likely to experience poor oral health than others, little is known about the experiences of people within these groups in Oldham as such information is not currently collected.

3. How can we improve oral health?

3.1 Oral health conditions such as tooth decay, gum disease, and mouth cancer can be prevented by:

- toothbrushing twice per day
- maintaining good oral hygiene
- increasing exposure to fluoride
- reducing the frequency and amount of sugar in the diet
- reducing use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs
- regular dental check-ups

3.2 Effective interventions support residents to establish these behaviors. Additionally, understanding signs and symptoms of mouth cancer can lead to earlier identification and more successful treatment.

4. Summary of Current Workstreams

4.1 Currently, our oral health work streams are focused on establishing good oral health in early life and supporting mouthcare among older adults in residential care. Interventions are based on the best available evidence and value for money.

4.2 The Integrated Children and Families Service includes a dedicated Oral Health Lead who provides oral health education to professionals working with babies, young children and their families. This means professionals are well equipped to share oral health messages with families and integrate good practice into their work. The service also provides toothbrushes, toothpaste and information leaflets to families as part of the routine health

visiting service. Resources are also provided to organisations working with families at higher risk of poor oral health on request. The Oral Health Lead has established a Healthy Eating Award for Early Years Settings to encourage settings to provide healthy food and drink to children in their care.

- 4.3 Supervised toothbrushing is an initiative in which children are supervised by their teacher to brush their own teeth, as part of the daily routine at nursery or school. Research shows it works well to establish good brushing habits and prevent tooth decay. It is also very good value for money, with around £3 saved on dental treatment for every £1 spent on supervised toothbrushing. In 2025, the national government announced dedicated funding to support supervised toothbrushing for 3-5 year old children in the most deprived 20% of areas in England. Thanks to this funding, in September 2025 we commissioned a dentist-led supervised toothbrushing organization – My Dental Buddy – to provide supervised toothbrushing support in Oldham. To ensure as many children benefit as possible, it was decided to offer this support to all 3-5 year old children Early Years Settings and Primary Schools in Oldham. From 2026, support will also be offered to all children of primary school age in SEND schools, to reflect the additional need for oral health support in this group. Thanks to a large donation of toothbrushes and toothpastes from Colgate Palmolive, we have also been able to promote toothbrushing at home by providing toothbrushes and toothpastes to 3- and 4-year-old children in Oldham to use at home.
- 4.4 Additionally, in 2026, dentists from My Dental Buddy will be offering visits to nurseries and schools in the most deprived areas of Oldham. Within these visits, they will share oral health education with children and provide fluoride varnishing (with parental consent). Fluoride varnishing is a quick and easy treatment offered by dental professionals, in which a liquid containing fluoride is painted onto the teeth to help prevent tooth decay. The aim of this additional targeted support is to reduce oral health inequalities among children in Oldham.
- 4.5 Another initiative aiming to reduce oral health inequalities is the community-based oral health promotion service Healthy Smiles Healthy Bodies. This service trains members of community and voluntary organisations to become Oral Health Champions. These individuals are then equipped to share oral health messages with members of their community groups and champion good practice. The training sessions can be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of people participating. There has previously been a focus on working with Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities due to substantially higher rates of tooth decay among residents in these ethnic groups. This has continued, but in 2025 the reach of Healthy Smiles Healthy Bodies has expanded to other resident groups with higher oral health need, for example Roma communities.
- 4.6 RIS Products provide training on mouth care and oral health to professionals working in residential care and providing care at home in Oldham.
- 4.7 In Oldham there are established workstreams to reduce harms from alcohol, tobacco and drugs and to promote healthy food and drink choices. These workstreams will have oral health benefits as well as broader health benefits for our residents.

5. Future Plans

- 5.1 Following the completion of an oral health needs assessment, a new Life Course Oral Health Strategy has been established with four key focus areas.
- Early Years – establishing good oral health habits among 0-5s

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- Targeted Groups – reducing barriers to good oral health among vulnerable population groups
 - Food Environment – establishing a positive food and drink environment in which healthy choices are easier choices
 - Oral Health System – working together to improve oral health and reduce inequalities at every opportunity.

5.2 In January 2026, the new strategy and accompanying Steering Group will be launched. To complement ongoing workstreams summarized above, additional activity has been approved and will commence shortly. These activities aim to fill current gaps in life course provision from school aged children and adults at higher risk of poor oral health. The initiatives are based on best evidence and recommended actions in the NICE Guidelines for oral health improvement.

Altogether, this will provide comprehensive support to improve oral health across all life stages and reduce oral health inequalities in Oldham.

5.2 New Initiatives for 2026

- ‘Give Up Loving Pop’ – an education campaign on the content and consequences soft drinks will be delivered in targeted primary schools. The campaign encourages children to give up sugary drinks for a 3-week period and encourages participating schools to consider a milk and water only drinks policy.
- Youth Council – a small, dedicated fund will be allocated for the Youth Council to develop their own oral health promotion initiative aimed at young people.
- Holistic oral health support for vulnerable groups- workforce training and oral health resources e.g. toothbrushes and paste will be made available to organisations working closely with groups at a higher risk of poor oral health. Additionally, an insight gathering exercise will be commissioned to better understand oral health challenges among these residents in Oldham and inform future work.
- Community Fund- a community oral health fund will be established to empower local organisations to implement oral health promotion for their communities.

6. Achievements to date

- 75% Early Years Settings hold a Healthy Eating Award
- Over 1000 children 3-5 year olds in Oldham are brushing their teeth daily at nursery or school
- Over 3000 3-4 year old children were given a free Colgate Palmolive toothbrush and toothpaste in 2025
- Over 100 professionals working with children and families received oral health training in 2025
- The percentage of 5-year olds with tooth decay has reduced from 48.8% in 2008 to 36.3% in 2024

% of 5 year olds with tooth decay in Oldham



- From April - September 2025, 25 face-to-face oral health training sessions were complete in residential care homes and 6 sessions were completed for staff providing care to residents at home.
- The number of confirmed aspiration pneumonia cases among care home residents reduced from 6 per month in July 2024 to 0 in April 2025.

Number of confirmed cases of aspiration pneumonia from Oldham Care Homes 2024/25

