

Portfolio Report

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mohon Ali, Cabinet Member for Education & Skills

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

Key Achievements for 2025/26

Major Improvements in SEND Services

- Ofsted/CQC confirmed Oldham has taken effective action to improve SEND services.
- Confidence in SEND support rose by 13%, with over 80% of families reporting real progress.
- Significant SEND capital investment delivering 250+ new specialist places.

Strong Attendance & Inclusion Outcomes

- Permanent exclusions down 23%, suspensions down 28%, and children missing education reduced sharply.
- Year 7 attendance reached 98.2%, with primary and secondary outperforming statistical neighbours.
- DfE selected Oldham to lead the North West attendance improvement programme.

Rising Educational Standards

- KS2 results up 2.2 percentage points, outperforming national improvement.
- Improved GCSE and A-level performance.
- Multiple positive Ofsted inspections, including Newbridge retaining Outstanding.

Expanding Skills, Post-16 & Employment Opportunities

- Employment & Skills Strategy launched, shaping Oldham's future workforce.
- £437k secured for 180 new college places, with a further £1.26m bid in progress.
- NEET performance improved (NEET at 3.95%, participation at 95.1%).

Innovation & Enrichment

- First GM borough to invest in the MegaHub digital futures programme.
- Oldham Music Service delivered extensive cultural activity, reaching 5,000 pupils and winning top national band contest results.

Government White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving

The new Government White Paper sets out a national ambition to ensure every child receives a high-quality, inclusive education and access to wider opportunities that support their wellbeing and lifelong success. For Oldham, this reinforces our existing priorities: strengthening inclusion, raising outcomes, improving attendance, and ensuring all learners, especially those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds, can thrive. Its focus on early help, attendance, multi-agency working and strong curriculum pathways aligns with work underway across Oldham's education system.

SEND and Inclusion

Following the Ofsted/CQC monitoring visit in November, I am pleased to advise that the Oldham area partnership has taken effective action. I want to express my sincere thanks to all who have supported and contributed to this positive outcome. We have strengthened our partnership working and improved governance arrangements. We have a solid foundation to build on as we continue to work together to deliver more positive experiences and stronger outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

We are updating our Priority Action Plan and a Partnership Maturity Assessment as required by DfE. An enhanced version of the Local Inclusion Support Offer has been released to schools. We

are creating a new LA speech and language therapy team and continuing to develop inclusion hubs in our mainstream schools. Work has been ongoing to support transitions as children move from one stage of their learning to another, ensuring educational progress is not disrupted.

The 'SEND Matters in Oldham Conference' took place in January 2026 where we launched the Ordinarily Available Inclusive Provision (OAIP) guidance, set out our next steps and priorities and provided a platform to strengthen inclusive practice across our education settings.

Quality of Education

Following further conversions of LA maintained schools there are now 67 academies and 43 maintained schools across Oldham. The local authority continues to play a key strategic role as system leader with maintained schools and Multi-Academy Trust on topics such as School Place Projections, Inclusion & Achievement Outcomes and Oldham Learning Partnership Priorities. Inclusion outcomes in Oldham are now amongst the strongest of our Statistical Neighbours, often above National Averages and are viewed as exemplary by other boroughs. This follows a sustained period of focus over recent years. Attendance has improved in both primary and secondary phases since the detrimental impact of the pandemic. Persistent Absence is improved in both phases. The primary school attendance rate has returned to the pre pandemic level, and the secondary rank is at its best ever and in the top 50 nationally.

In recognition of the significant improvement in our school attendance figures, I'm delighted that DfE asked Oldham to lead a programme on strengthening school attendance across the North West. Funding was provided by DfE and Oldham received £80,000 from the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence fund to support this programme.

Suspension rates in the primary phase continue to be significantly below regional and national rates and exclusion rates in the primary phase are now the best in England for a second year. In the secondary phase, rates have increased and this will require sustained focus.

Achievement outcomes are a priority area. A report presented to Children and Young People's Scrutiny Board provided a summary of educational outcomes for 2024/25 While some phases have returned to pre-pandemic performance, gaps remain and targeted work continues.

Virtual School

There has been an increase in the number of children and young people becoming looked after. Our team collaborates with schools, Social Workers and wider professionals providing advice, guidance and direct support to ensure the educational needs of Children Looked After and those from other disadvantaged groups are identified, supported and met. The Virtual School Annual Report was presented at Corporate Parenting Panel in January to provide an overview of the work of the Team and educational outcomes for our cohort in 2024/25.

Music

A talented student was successful in securing a place at the renowned Chetham School of Music. The Youth Brass Band is preparing to compete in the National Youth Brass Band Championships in Birmingham. Fourteen children from two of Oldham's most deprived wards have secured four-year funded access to string lessons through Young Sounds Connect.

Post-16, Skills, Apprenticeships and Adult Learning

GMCA have agreed funding for the continuation of three projects for 2026/27; NEET, WorkWell Vanguard, and Trailblazer. Work is progressing on the Employment and Skills Strategy Implementation Plan, with governance structures being finalized with partners. The Annual NEET Report was presented at Children and Young People Scrutiny. The latest data shows:

- Year 12 Participation was 95.1%, higher than the rate at the same time in 2024 (93.76%)
- NEET rate (Y12/13 combined) was 3.95%, below the previous rate in 2024 of 3.97%
- Unknown rate (Y12/13) combined stands at 1%. 2024 figure was 1.87%

National and regional comparisons are currently favourable for Oldham. 8 out of the possible 12 indicators are "equal to or better than national and statistical neighbour averages".

We are introducing Brokering Relationships Between Employers and Educators (BREE), a low-maintenance digital brokerage system that connects employers with schools and colleges, to provide high-quality employer engagement opportunities. This will reduce duplication, strengthen curriculum-employer links, and improve pathways into work for young people. BREE aligns with Oldham's Employment and Skills Strategy and supports more consistent, inclusive access to real-world learning experiences.

Summary

We continue to hold the highest ambition and aspirations for our children and young people. We take seriously our responsibilities, not only to keep them safe but to ensure that they are supported to thrive and achieve the best possible outcomes. We continue to work with partners to address barriers to success and to improve attendance and educational outcomes. We have seen progress in areas such as inclusion and attendance and will continue to work with school leaders to raise educational outcomes.

Our children and young people **can** succeed, despite challenges such as additional needs or socio-economic factors. We know this will require a sustained effort from every officer, teacher, leader, governor, parent and carer. But we believe that, through our continued hard work and partnership, together we can realise our ambition for our children and young people.

Recommendation: Council is requested to note the report