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Oldham Council

Report to Health & Wellbeing Board

Northern Care Alliance: Current Position, Improvement Activity and System Response

Portfolio Holder: All Group Leaders

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September 2026

Reason for Decision
This report is to brief members of the Health and Wellbeing Board on the current situation at the Northern Care Alliance following various media reports.

Executive Summary
This report provides the Health and Wellbeing Board with an overview of recent concerns relating to the Northern Care Alliance NHS Foundation Trust (NCA), the actions being taken by the Trust and the wider NHS system, and the implications for services used by Oldham residents.

The report has been prepared following significant national and local media coverage concerning patient safety, governance, organisational culture and the management of concerns within the Trust. It also reflects recent regulatory action taken by NHS England and the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

Recommendations
The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:

1. Note the contents of this report.
2. Note the actions being taken by the Northern Care Alliance, NHS Greater Manchester and NHS England North West.
3. Note that there are currently no proposed service changes affecting Oldham residents as a consequence of the improvement programme.
4. Request a further update once the Northern Care Alliance Integrated Improvement Plan has been finalised and agreed with regulators.

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Health & Wellbeing Board September 2026

Northern Care Alliance: Current Position, Improvement Activity and System Response

1 Background

1.1 The Northern Care Alliance NHS Foundation Trust was established in 2021 and provides hospital and community services across Oldham, Rochdale, Bury and Salford, including services delivered from The Royal Oldham Hospital.

1.2 Over recent months a number of concerns relating to patient safety, quality governance, organisational culture and leadership have received increased public attention through media reporting and regulatory scrutiny. These concerns have included:

- Historic failures in spinal surgery services that were examined through the independent Carlo Breen review.
- Concerns within gynaecology services relating to governance, administration and patient follow-up.
- Issues relating to incident management, complaints handling and organisational learning.
- Concerns regarding Freedom to Speak Up arrangements and whether staff consistently feel able to raise concerns.
- Ongoing challenges in urgent and emergency care, patient flow and workforce pressures.
- Wider concerns regarding organisational leadership, governance and improvement capacity.

1.3 Some of these issues relate to historic events and services, while others concern how effectively the organisation identifies, manages and learns from risks across the Trust. The cumulative effect has resulted in increased regulatory oversight and public concern.

1.4 Many of the issues now receiving public attention were already subject to varying degrees of regulatory oversight, review activity and improvement programmes before the recent media coverage. What has changed is the level of public visibility, the accumulation of concerns across multiple service areas and the subsequent decision by regulators to introduce enhanced improvement and assurance arrangements.

2 Public and Stakeholder Concerns

2.1 Recent media coverage has generated significant concern amongst patients, staff, residents, elected members and partner organisations across Greater Manchester. Concerns expressed publicly have focused on several key themes, including patient safety, delayed diagnosis and treatment, organisational culture, incident investigation, complaints handling, workforce pressures and whether staff feel able to raise concerns through Freedom to Speak Up arrangements.

2.2 For residents and patients, the primary concern is whether services remain safe and whether any historic or current failings may have affected patient care. There is also understandable concern regarding the pace of improvement and whether lessons from previous incidents and reviews have been embedded consistently across the organisation.

2.3 For staff, issues raised publicly have included organisational culture, leadership visibility, governance arrangements and confidence in internal processes for escalating concerns. These themes have featured in both regulatory findings and Freedom to Speak Up discussions over recent years.

2.4 For elected members and system partners, the principal concern is ensuring that residents continue to receive safe, high-quality care whilst maintaining confidence that identified issues are being addressed openly, transparently and at pace through robust improvement arrangements and independent oversight. This has led to requests for additional briefings, assurance and ongoing reporting from both the Northern Care Alliance and NHS Greater Manchester.

2.5 Whilst the concerns are serious, NHS Greater Manchester, NHS England and the Northern Care Alliance have all emphasised that patients should continue to attend appointments and seek healthcare services as normal unless contacted directly by the Trust. There are currently no planned service changes associated with the improvement programme

3 Regulatory and External Review Findings

3.1 Over the last two years the Northern Care Alliance has been subject to a range of reviews and oversight processes relating to quality, safety and governance. These have included:

- Independent review of spinal services.
- Rapid Quality Reviews relating to spinal and gynaecology services.
- NHS England quality oversight activity.
- Care Quality Commission inspections and warning notices.
- Wider governance and leadership reviews.

3.2 In summer 2026 NHS England issued formal enforcement undertakings to the Trust. These identified concerns relating to quality governance, management of risk and progress in addressing known issues within certain clinical services.

3.3 The Care Quality Commission has also issued a Section 29A Warning Notice following its Well Led assessment. The notice identified concerns relating to:

- Investigation and learning from patient safety incidents.
- Complaints management and organisational learning.
- Oversight of Freedom to Speak Up arrangements.
- Governance and risk management processes.
- Workforce wellbeing and equality-related workforce issues.

4 What the Northern Care Alliance is Doing

4.1 The Northern Care Alliance has acknowledged the seriousness of the issues raised and has stated publicly that patient safety remains its primary concern.

4.2 Key actions being undertaken by the Trust include:

Integrated Improvement Plan

4.2.1 The Trust is developing a single Integrated Improvement Plan which will bring together all actions arising from:

- NHS England undertakings.
- Care Quality Commission requirements.
- Independent reviews.
- Existing patient safety and governance improvement activity.

4.2.2 The intention is to replace multiple separate programmes with a single framework that can be monitored by regulators, partners and the Trust Board.

Changes to Clinical Leadership

4.2.3 In April 2026 the Trust introduced a new clinically-led operating model designed to place greater clinical leadership at the centre of decision-making and quality improvement activity.

Freedom to Speak Up and Culture

4.2.4 The Trust has appointed an independent senior nurse to strengthen arrangements for handling staff concerns and ensuring that any immediate patient safety issues are escalated appropriately.

External Review Activity

4.2.5 Further independent reviews of spinal and gynaecology services are planned, with findings expected to inform the next phase of improvement work.

Leadership Arrangements

4.2.6 The Trust is currently managing a period of leadership transition. Arrangements are being put in place to secure additional executive leadership support while improvement activity continues.

5 What NHS Greater Manchester is Doing

5.1 NHS Greater Manchester, as the Integrated Care Board, has significantly increased oversight arrangements relating to the Northern Care Alliance. This includes:

- Ongoing quality surveillance and assurance activity.
- Additional quality review meetings.
- Scrutiny of progress against improvement actions.
- Monitoring of patient safety risks.
- Monitoring of delivery against regulatory requirements.
- Regular reporting to NHS Greater Manchester governance structures.

5.2 NHS Greater Manchester has stated that its immediate focus is ensuring safe services for patients while supporting the longer-term programme of organisational improvement.

6 What NHS England North West is Doing

6.1 NHS England North West is providing formal regulatory oversight of the Trust's improvement programme. Key elements include:

- Formal enforcement undertakings.
- Establishment of enhanced oversight arrangements.
- Creation of a System Improvement Board.
- Monitoring progress against agreed actions and milestones.
- Oversight of external reviews.
- Ongoing assessment of clinical quality, governance and leadership improvements.

6.2 NHS England will therefore play the principal role in assessing whether the Trust delivers the required improvements and complies with regulatory requirements.

7 Governance and Accountability

7.1 It is important to recognise that the Northern Care Alliance is an NHS Foundation Trust with its own Board of Directors and statutory responsibilities for the quality and safety of services it provides. Oversight of provider quality, performance and regulatory compliance sits through established NHS governance arrangements involving the Trust Board, NHS Greater Manchester, NHS England and the Care Quality Commission.

7.2 Locality (Oldham) and place-based partnerships have an important role in understanding the implications for residents and local services but do not undertake the provider governance functions of the Trust or system regulators.

8 Implications for Oldham

8.1 The concerns outlined above have understandably generated significant interest amongst Oldham residents, elected members, Healthwatch and wider system partners. Given the importance of Northern Care Alliance services to the borough, local partners have sought ongoing assurance regarding patient safety, service continuity and delivery of the improvement programme.

8.2 The Royal Oldham Hospital remains open and continues to provide services to local residents. There are currently no planned service changes linked to the improvement programme. Patients are being advised to continue attending appointments unless contacted directly by the Trust.

8.3 Oldham Council, NHS Greater Manchester Oldham locality partners and elected members have sought assurances that:

- Services provided to Oldham residents remain safe.
- Any historic or current patient harm is identified and addressed appropriately.
- Improvement activity is robust and transparent.
- Local partners are kept informed of progress.
- Public confidence is maintained through clear communication.

8.4 Since the recent concerns entered the public domain, local partners have sought assurances from both the Northern Care Alliance and NHS Greater Manchester regarding the implications for Oldham residents and services. This has included requests for information relating to patient safety, service continuity, governance arrangements, regulatory oversight and delivery of the Trust's improvement programme. These matters will continue to be monitored through existing partnership, locality, Health and Wellbeing Board and health scrutiny arrangements

8.5 Given the importance of NCA services to Oldham residents, continued monitoring and engagement through local partnership and scrutiny arrangements will remain necessary as the improvement programme progresses.

9 Conclusion

9.1 The concerns identified within the Northern Care Alliance are serious and have resulted in significant regulatory intervention and heightened public scrutiny. However, a substantial programme of improvement, oversight and external assurance is now underway involving the Trust, NHS Greater Manchester, NHS England North West and the Care Quality Commission.

9.2 There is currently no evidence of any planned reduction in services for Oldham residents as a consequence of this work. The focus of all organisations involved is on maintaining safe services in the short term while delivering sustained improvements in quality, governance, leadership and organisational culture over the longer term.

10.0 Financial Implications

10.1 None for the Council.

11.0 Legal Implications

11.1 None for the Council at this stage as it is an NHS accountability.

12 Procurement Implications

12.1 At this stage none for the Council. However, the Council jointly procures/commissions some services from the NCA with the ICB. The Council will keep under review the situation and will bring forward nay proposed changes if that becomes necessary.

13.0 Equality Impact, including implications for Children and Young People

13.1 No

14 Key Decision

14.1 No

15 Key Decision Reference

15.1 N/A

16 Background Papers

16.1 N/A

17 Appendices

17.1 None

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Signed _____ Cabinet Member (specify whom)	Dated _____
Signed _____ Executive Director/Deputy Chief Executive	Dated _____