

Funding and Recruitment of Key Roles to Strengthen Early Identification and Preventative Support through the Best Start in Life Programme

Decision Maker: Shelley Kipling, Chief Executive

Service Area: Children's Services Integration

Directorate: Children and Young People

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Date of Decision: 5 October 2026

1. Power to make the decision

The decision is being taken under the authorisation contained in Section 9C – Delegations to Specific Officers of Part 3 (Responsibility for Functions) of the Council Constitution for the Chief Executive to take any emergency decisions in respect of the Council's executive functions which cannot be delayed until the next Cabinet meeting.

2. Decision Sought

The Department for Education has awarded Oldham Council an additional ringfenced Children with Additional Needs allocation of £1,756,100 across the period 2026/27 to 2028/29 as part of the Best Start in Life Programme. The funding is intended to strengthen early identification, intervention and inclusion support for babies and young children with emerging additional needs.

To support delivery of the programme and ensure compliance with Department for Education grant conditions, approval is sought to:

- Accept the additional Children with Additional Needs funding allocation of £1,756,100.
- Create and recruit to 1 Integrated Team Manager post (Grade 10, permanent post), 5 Early Years Quality Practitioner posts (Grade 5) and 7 Best Start Inclusion Practitioner posts (Grade 5) until 31 March 2029.
- Delegate authority to the Executive Director for Children and Young People, in consultation with the Director of Finance, to determine the allocation of the remaining Children with Additional Needs funding in accordance with programme priorities and Department for Education grant conditions.

3. Reason for urgency

Confirmation of the Children with Additional Needs funding allocation has been received from the Department for Education and the funding is subject to grant conditions requiring delivery arrangements to be mobilised within the funding period. The recruitment of a minimum of seven Best Start Inclusion Practitioners is a specific requirement of the Children with Additional Needs programme and forms part of Oldham's agreed delivery commitments.

A decision is required urgently to allow recruitment processes to commence, enabling posts to be established from December 2026 and ensuring sufficient time to recruit, induct and deploy staff to support children and families. Delay would reduce the available delivery period, impact programme mobilisation and risk undermining the achievement of programme outcomes relating to early identification, intervention, inclusion and school readiness.

4. Risk(s) of not taking the decision

Failure to approve the recommendation would result in a significant risk of non-compliance with Department for Education grant requirements and may affect Oldham's ability to deliver the Children with Additional Needs workstream.

The Best Start Inclusion Practitioner roles are a mandatory element of the Department for Education's Children with Additional Needs programme. Delays in recruitment may result in increased competition for suitably qualified candidates as recruitment progresses across Greater Manchester, potentially affecting the Council's ability to appoint high-quality applicants and mobilise the programme within the required timescales.

There is a risk that opportunities to identify developmental concerns and emerging special educational needs at the earliest stage would be missed, reducing the effectiveness of preventative support and impacting outcomes for children and families. Delays in recruitment would also reduce workforce capacity across Family Hubs, Early Years and SEND services and limit the Council's ability to improve school readiness and inclusion outcomes.

Failure to mobilise the programme at pace may also reduce the impact of the investment and result in missed opportunities to improve outcomes for babies, young children and their families across Oldham.

5. Financial impact if decision not taken forward

The Department for Education has awarded Oldham £1,756,100 of ringfenced Children with Additional Needs funding for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29. The funding must be used in accordance with grant conditions to support delivery of the Children with Additional Needs workstream.

Failure to approve the recommendations may result in delays to programme delivery, reduced utilisation of the grant and an increased risk that funding conditions are not fully met. This could impact Oldham's ability to deliver the intended benefits of the programme and may jeopardise future funding opportunities.

The proposed staffing model is fully funded from the Children with Additional Needs allocation and Early Years DSG resources. No additional pressure will be placed upon the Council's General Fund. The staffing commitment across the programme period is estimated at £1,485,073, leaving approximately £444,060 available to support wider programme priorities in accordance with Department for Education requirements.

Whilst there is a potential risk of future workforce costs should funding cease, this risk is considered manageable. The posts are funded through ringfenced grant and DSG resources, with workforce and financial planning arrangements in place to review ongoing service requirements, future funding opportunities and redeployment options prior to the end of the funding period. The Council has significant experience of managing time-limited externally funded programmes and mitigating associated workforce risks.

Any underspend in the Best Start in Life grant in 2026/27 could be clawed back by DfE.

6. Statutory Officer clearances

a. Section 151 Officer

Name Lee Walsh

Date 15 September 2026

Comments

This report seeks approval to accept an additional £1.756m Children with Additional Needs allocation from the Department for Education for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29. While the funding will support service delivery during this period, there is a potential financial risk associated with ongoing workforce costs should future funding not continue beyond the current allocation. The Council has considerable experience in managing externally funded, time-limited programmes and mitigating the associated workforce implications. Any residual financial impact arising from the cessation of funding would be considered as part of future budget-setting processes.

b. Monitoring Officer

Name :Alex Bougatef

Date: 15th September 2026

Comments:

The exercise of emergency powers should be undertaken in consultation with the Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council. However, the Council has not yet appointed a Leader or Deputy Leader for the current municipal year so it is not possible to consult them. In addition, there is no certainty about when a Leader or Deputy Leader will be appointed, as the Council has failed at successive meetings to do so. For the reasons given in the report an urgent decision is required and the matter cannot await the appointment of a Leader and Deputy Leader at some undetermined future date.