



ONWARD >

Levelling up in practice >

Interim report from Oldham

RESEARCH NOTE

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Introduction

The Government's levelling up agenda is focused on reversing decades of socio-economic decline, restoring a sense of opportunity and belonging to parts of the UK where they have been lost. The Levelling Up White Paper set out the strategy to achieve this at a national scale. It introduces broad missions to galvanise action until 2030, commitments to devolve power to local leaders, and policies to kickstart a regeneration revolution. But action also needs to come from below.

Places' ability to level *themselves* up is hampered by the fact there is currently no agreed methodology for practical change, and certainly not one rooted in evidence and informed by the views of local communities. While the White Paper's 332 pages cover a lot of ground, they do not provide a clear and practical roadmap for local leaders.

Successful local improvement policies follow an established, replicable model of change. Free schools were based on evidence from charter schools that autonomy and accountability could improve attainment and breed innovation. Similar approaches informed Tony Crosland's comprehensive schools, Michael Heseltine's Development Corporations and Tony Blair's Sure Start centres: they all followed a consistent methodology that was proven to work.

We need to approach levelling up in a similar way. As the White Paper itself acknowledges, temporary funding and national policies are unlikely to drive sustainable revival in places that have been losing momentum since the 1970s. “Left behind” places need a consistent approach to revival that is based in evidence and practical to deliver. In some communities this change is already happening, with inspiring local leaders taking steps to turn around the fortunes of their places. These examples are the exception not the rule, and the replicable lessons from these “bright spots” are not well understood.

This is the challenge that Onward’s Levelling Up in Practice programme will attempt to tackle. Working closely with local communities, local leaders and businesses, we want to develop a prototype for levelling up, rooted in the local rather than the national. In doing so, we are bringing together and building on the research into how to restore our social fabric and strengthen economic opportunity that we have conducted since we were founded in 2018.

We believe this methodology for Levelling Up needs to be different from past attempts at regeneration. It needs to make places great to live in as well as making them wealthier, prioritise the social fabric alongside economic fundamentals, and bring opportunities to where people live already - rather than expecting them to move. And our methodology needs to marry consistency and flexibility: clear and replicable enough as a playbook that different communities can adopt it, but not so rigid that it ignores the nuances of local context. Our approach combines three steps - data diagnostics, field visits, and the development of a playbook of interventions.

Data Diagnostics

We are developing a diagnostic tool that will seek to understand the economic and social characteristics of an area through a range of quantitative datasets. This will combine both publicly available measures and tools developed by Onward like our ‘Network Effects’ dataset on the relationship between transport connectivity and jobs. Wherever possible, data will be granular enough to understand neighbourhood level effects. Relevant frameworks will also be taken from the Levelling Up White Paper, including the six capitals - physical, human, intangible, financial, social and institutional.

Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina principle has been used to emphasise the differences between left behind places - “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”. Yet focusing solely on the differences between places can leave policy makers paralysed, and act as a barrier to learning from and adapting effective interventions. Using our diagnostic approach, we will develop a typology of places so that local leaders can identify relevant comparators. These groupings can then underpin replicable approaches across the country.

Field Visits

But quantitative data can only tell a partial story. Insights from local areas can add colour to diagnostic data, both in understanding how a place has changed over time and directly hearing the preferences of local communities about what they want from their area in future.

We will therefore visit a series of places across the UK, in order to meet with local leaders - including businesses, community groups, local and regional government, schools, colleges, and

universities. We will also speak directly to members of the public through a series of focus groups, to understand what they think levelling up means for them. This qualitative data will be used to interrogate the quantitative data we have gathered through our diagnostic, and to prioritise possible types of intervention.

Levelling Up Playbook

As we conduct this research, we are focused on identifying common problems and consistent demands in different places. These shared challenges will then form the building blocks for a set of replicable and scalable interventions.

Practicality will be at the core of the interventions we propose. They will primarily be low-cost, fast-acting interventions, within the gift of local leaders without recourse to central government. Interventions will be tried and tested elsewhere in the UK or comparable countries, and evidence-based

The playbook will not be applied in all places in the same way. It will instead serve as a series of possible route maps, based on the characteristics of the area and the vision of local communities. We hope that this will help to inspire and challenge local leaders and communities, rather than dictate to them.

Interim Reports

In the spirit of sharing and learning, we will regularly publish interim research which summarise what we have learnt in each place and offer initial thoughts and recommendations. These will serve to prompt discussion and unearth common themes, and improve the robustness of the prototype once all the research has been concluded. These notes are not an initial draft of the prototype levelling up methodology, which can only be produced once we have completed our field work in a range of local areas.

Our Research in Oldham

The first place we have focused on is Oldham, which we visited in early February 2022. We are grateful to the team supporting the Oldham Economic Review for facilitating our work, and particularly Alun Francis, Debra Woodruff, and Sarah Harris at Oldham College.

We are extremely grateful to the individuals and organisations who gave their time to speak to us - Cllr Arooj Shah and Shelley Keplin at Oldham Council, Clive Memmot at the Greater Manchester Chambers of Commerce, Craig Holden at Ultimate Products, Donna Cezair at First Choice Homes, Glyn Potts at JH Newman School, Laura Windsor Welch and Maddy Hubbard at Action Together, Mike Masterson at Double M Business Services, Moinul Islam CBE at Outta Skool, Oliver Lee from Wilmot Dixon, and Tina Graham and Steph Gill at Greenacres Community Centre. While these conversations were highly valuable, the authors hold full responsibility for the contents of this interim research note.

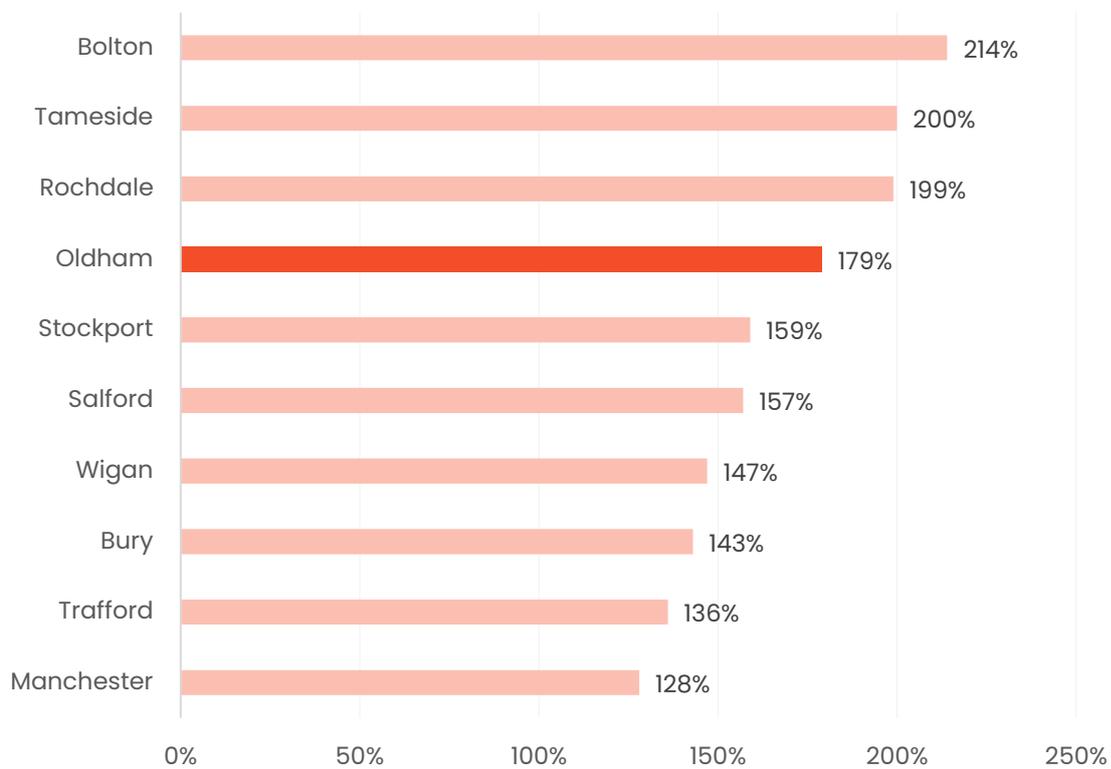
Oldham

“The town centre was on the edge and when the tram came, it pushed it over”
Janine, stay at home mum

Oldham’s tram reveals a lot about the complexities of the Levelling Up agenda.

The MetroLink extension to Oldham first opened in 2014, providing a direct route into Manchester city centre. It brought the central business district within a commuting distance, almost doubling the number of jobs accessible within 60 minutes compared to those available locally. It also gave residents access to amenities in the city centre, including theatres, restaurants, and shopping centres like the Arndale. This clearly aligns with the Government’s vision for the role of transport in Levelling Up.

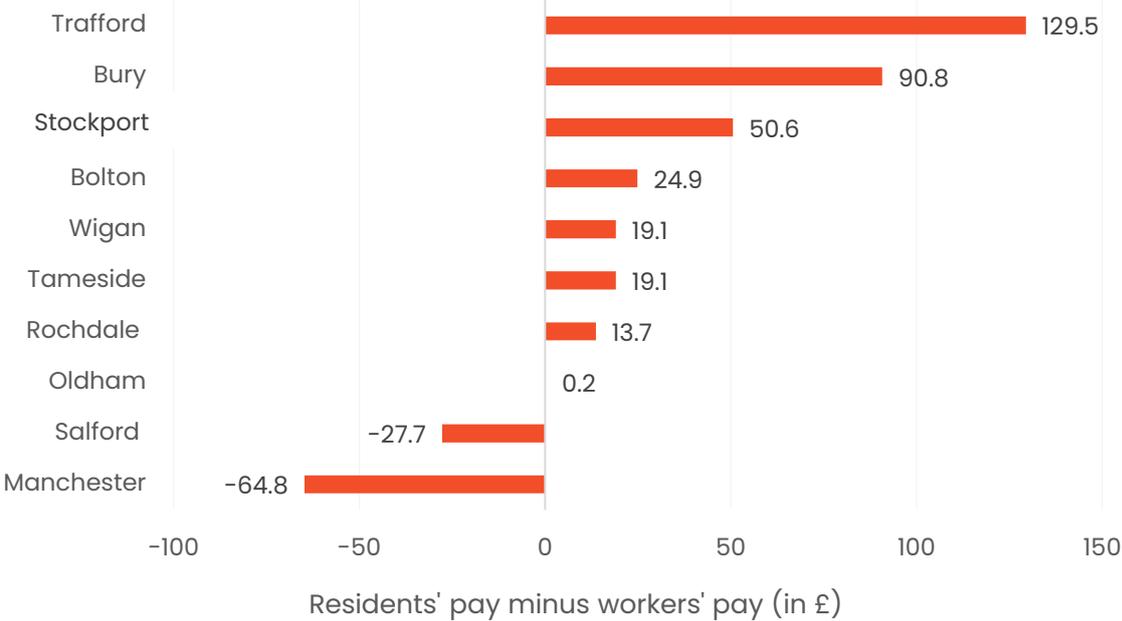
Figure 1: Number of jobs within 60 minutes, expressed as a percentage of jobs within 5 miles
Source: Onward (2021), *Network Effects*



But the tram has not been a success story. Before the pandemic (in 2019) wages of residents and workers in Oldham were almost identical to each other – indicating that there are a negligible number of commuters working in areas with higher productivity. In nearby Bury, residents earned £91 more than workers, and in Trafford that figure was £130. Ridership in Oldham on the tram has also plateaued in recent years, including the period before the pandemic.¹ This suggests that, despite having good access to jobs by public transport, Oldham has weak labour mobility compared to nearby boroughs.

Figure 2: Difference between the median weekly wage of workers and residents in each borough

Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings



One reason may be crime. In our qualitative research, many residents said that the tram simply isn't safe. Antisocial behaviour on the network is high, as well as instances of more serious crime. A female participant in one of our focus groups told us that "you take your life into your hands for a £3.60 return". Some employers have taken to introducing their own minibus services for workers, so they don't need to risk getting on the tram or the bus network. Concerns are most acute for young women or people travelling alone, particularly in darker hours - which impacts on commuting during winter months.

Our qualitative research would suggest that the tram's impact on the town centre has in fact been negative. Many of our focus group participants said that they would rather go to the city centre to eat, drink, and go shopping, undermining Oldham town centre as a destination for retail or hospitality. Others drive to neighbouring Rochdale, where the town centre's transformation was highlighted as an example of successful regeneration. One focus group participant said: "The town centre was on the edge and when the tram came, it pushed it over."

¹ LEA Transport and Business Connectivity, Oldham Council

This characterisation reflects the ‘six capitals’ framework articulated in the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper: physical capital alone has not been enough to level up Oldham, with low social capital leading to a lack of safety, low human capital maintaining invisible barriers between labour markets, and low financial capital limiting investment into the town centre.

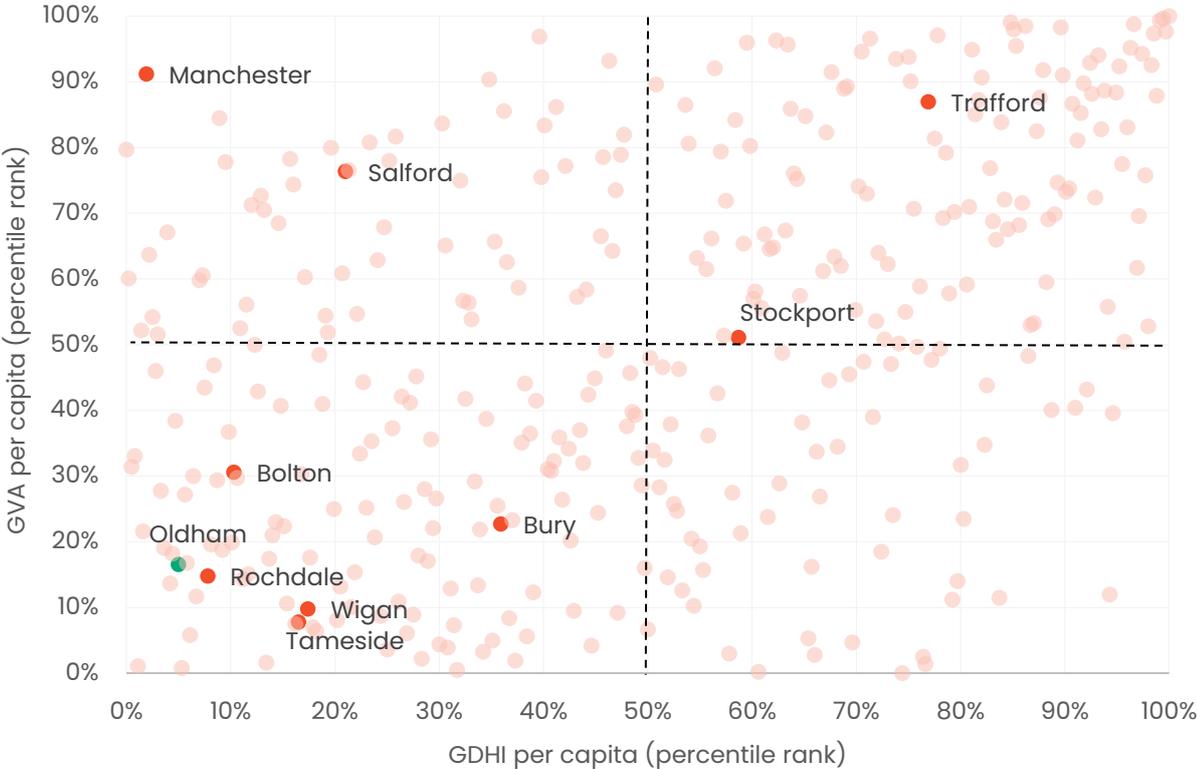
Initial Data Diagnostic

Below are two diagnostic graphs that plot an area’s relative economic strength and relative community strength.

Oldham’s economy is less productive than average. GVA per capita stands at just £17,330 - £5,970 below the national average, placing it at the 17th percentile. GDHI per capita is just £15,885 - £5,548 below the national average, placing it at the 5th percentile. Much of the rest of Greater Manchester falls in this bottom left quadrant of low productivity/low material welfare. Exceptions are Manchester, where city centre workers alongside poorer residents place it in the high productivity/low material welfare quadrant, and the more affluent Salford and Trafford which are in the same quadrant - although these areas are still not above the UK average in terms of material welfare.

Figure 3: GVA per capita vs GDHI per capita, in percentile ranks

Source: Onward Analysis of ONS Regional Accounts, 2019

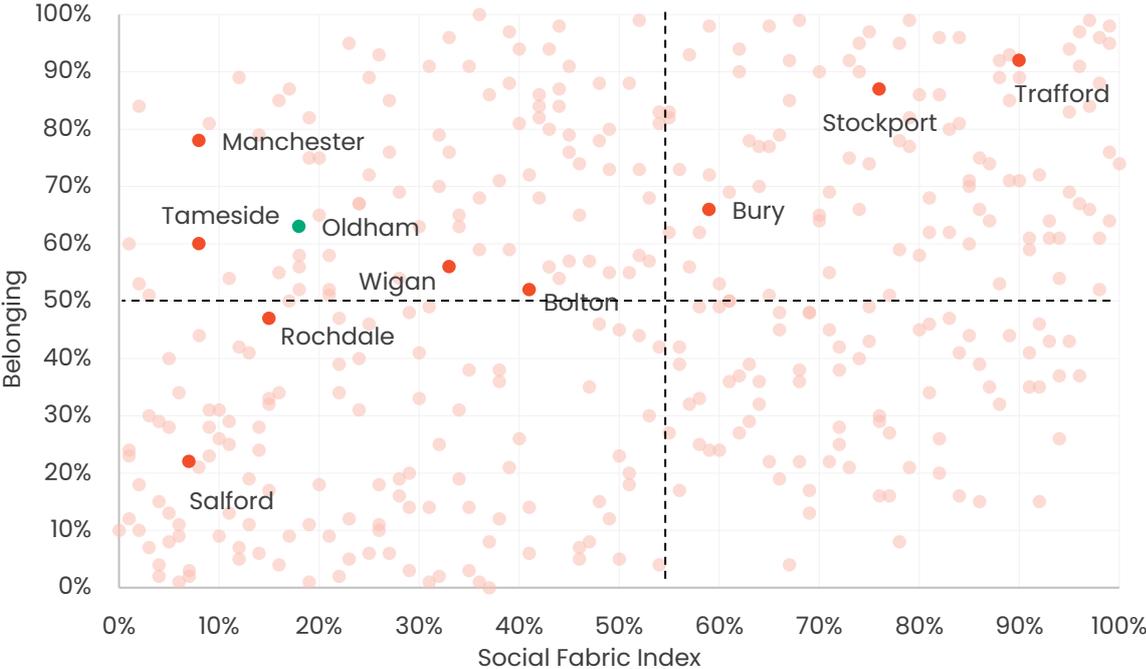


Oldham ranks at the 18th percentile for its Social Fabric Index score, which measures the strength of community across a range of metrics. It includes data on volunteering, membership of local groups, the physical infrastructure of places like shops and green spaces, trust in civic institutions, crime rates and marriage and family formation.²

But the borough ranks at the 63rd percentile for belonging, which measures the extent to which people feel that they “belong to their neighbourhood”, using Understanding Society survey data. Half of Greater Manchester’s areas fall in this ‘low social fabric/high belonging’ quadrant, while Bury, Stockport, and Trafford scoring above average on both measures. Salford sits in the ‘low social fabric/low belonging’ quadrant, despite higher scores on its productivity and material welfare.

Figure 4: Oldham has a fraying social fabric but a stronger sense of belonging

Source: Onward (2020) *The State of Our Social Fabric*, Onward analysis of Understanding Society



These two broad measures give an indication of how Oldham compares to the rest of Greater Manchester and the UK as a whole. In the remainder of this report, we turn to the four areas in the policy programme outlined in the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper to understand what they might mean for Oldham.

² A full methodology and list of variables is available in Onward (2020) ‘The State of Our Social Fabric’

1) Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector

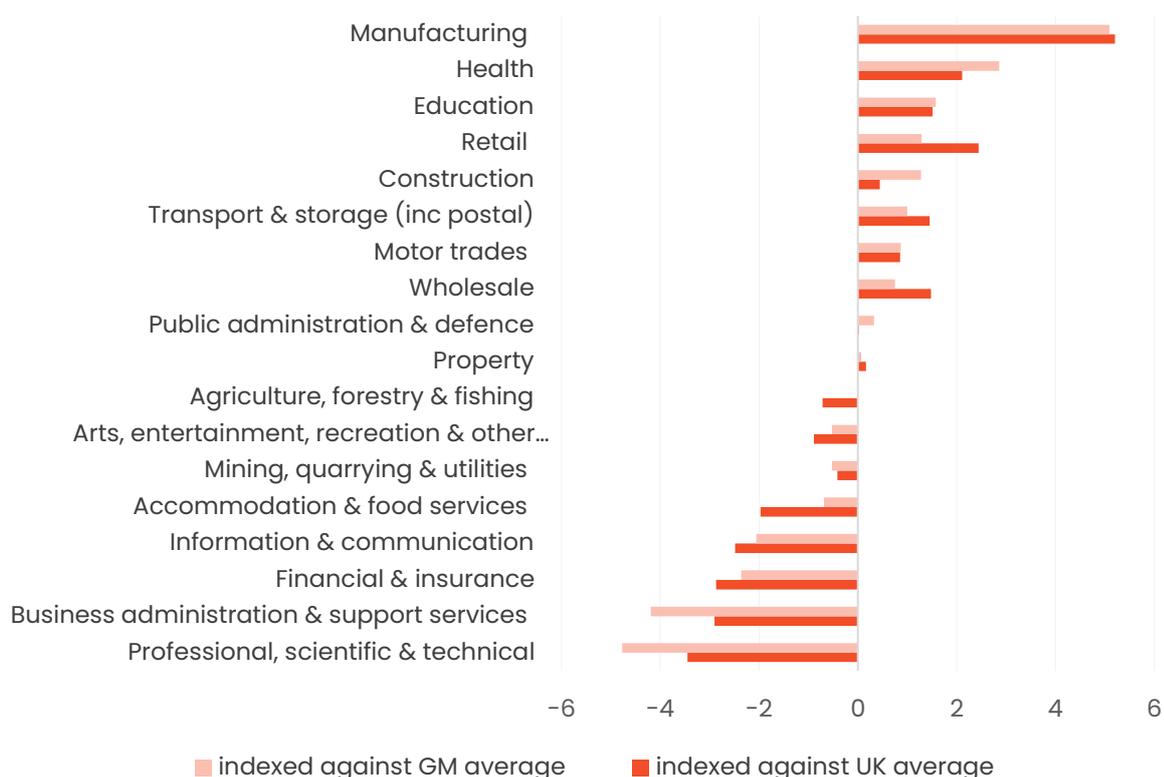
Like much of the Midlands and North of England, Oldham's economy is defined by deindustrialisation. In the second half of the 19th century the town became the world's manufacturing centre for spinning cotton - by 1909 it was spinning more cotton than France and Germany combined³. In the 20th Century, major employers were advanced manufacturing firms like Ferranti and British Aerospace - with the latter producing Lancaster bombers at their Chadderton site, a proud part of the area's heritage. Yet firms like these have reduced their presence in Oldham, and those that have stayed employ fewer people with higher level qualifications.

This has driven poverty and inequality in the area. Gross disposable household income per capita is the second lowest of all boroughs in Greater Manchester at just over £14,723, £4,000 below the national average. This manifests in broader inequalities, including a life expectancy gap of 16 years between the most and least affluent areas across the Combined Authority. Among the boroughs, Oldham has the third-lowest life expectancy, behind Manchester and Tameside. But Oldham also contains within it the MSOA with the lowest life expectancy in all of Greater Manchester, at 69.9 years. This MSOA covers the area between Spindles Shopping Centre and St Annes Rugby Club.

Today, the largest employers in Oldham are in the public sector - primarily the Local Authority, the NHS, and schools and colleges. Many workers are based in the foundational economy, with anchor employers like supermarkets providing some reliable and well-paid jobs.

Figure 5: Over/under representation of employment by industry

Source: Business Register and Employment Survey, 2020

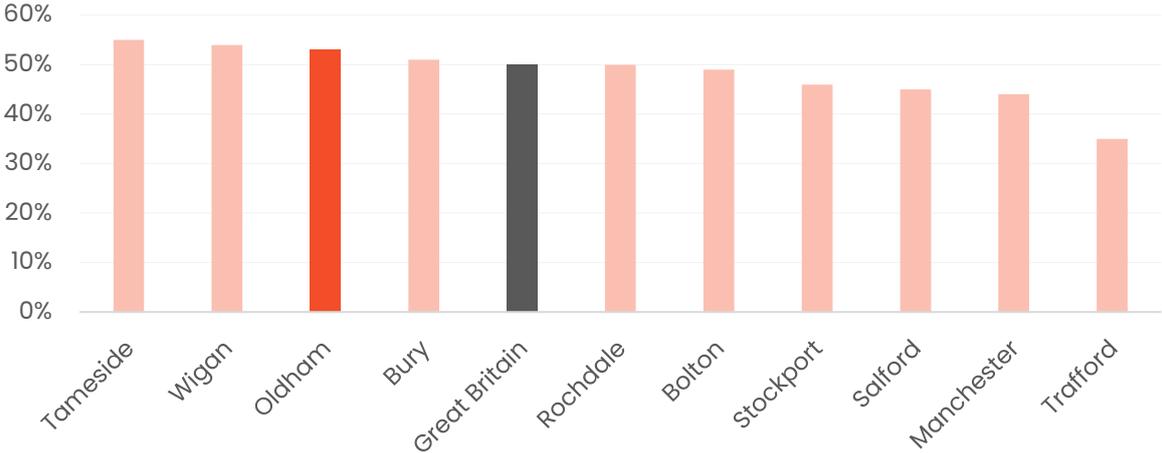


³ 'When Oldham ruled the world: Spindleopolis exhibition celebrates borough's legacy as cotton capital,' Mancunian Matters, July 2013

Oldham has the second-highest share of public sector jobs of any Greater Manchester borough (21.1%, compared to 17% across the city region). The key private sector employers are in retail, manufacturing and logistics, with proximity to the M60 making the area a good gateway to other areas of the North. Yet even logistics firms face challenges, and some interviewees highlighted the closure of the Shop Direct distribution centre in Shaw as a symbolic loss that dealt a blow to the local community. Jobs in the foundational economy account for 53% of all employment in Oldham. This is not the highest in Greater Manchester - Tameside and Wigan are more reliant on the foundational economy than Oldham, but it is higher than both the Greater Manchester average and the average across Great Britain.⁴

Figure 6: Proportion of employment in the foundational economy

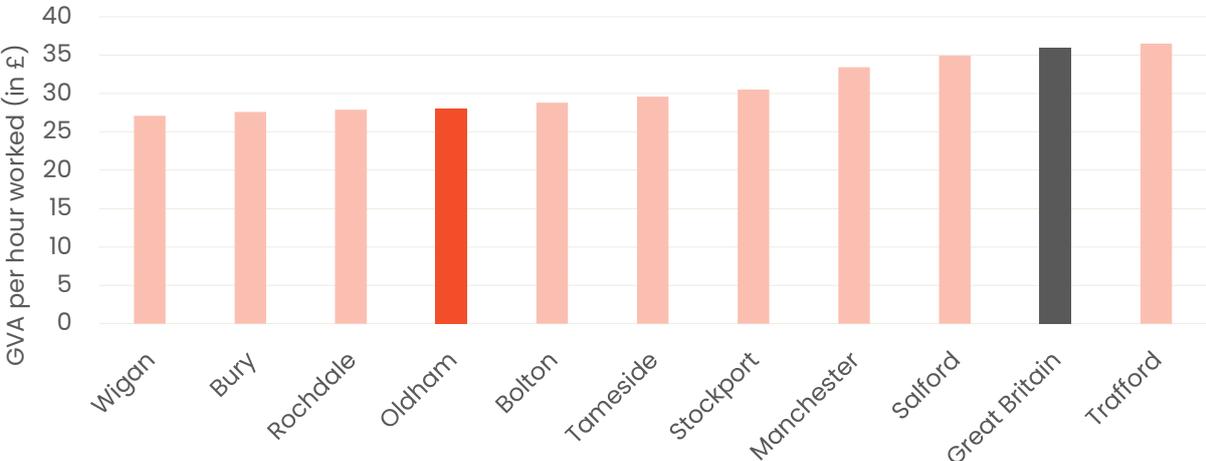
Source: Business Register and Employment Survey



Perhaps as a result, labour productivity in Oldham is far lower than the UK average, at £28 per hour, but not the lowest in Greater Manchester - Wigan, Bury, and Rochdale are all less productive than Oldham. This may reflect the high number of hospitality and retail jobs in the area, which have lower overall productivity than sectors like financial and professional services.

Figure 7: GVA per hour worked, 2019

Source: ONS Subregional productivity



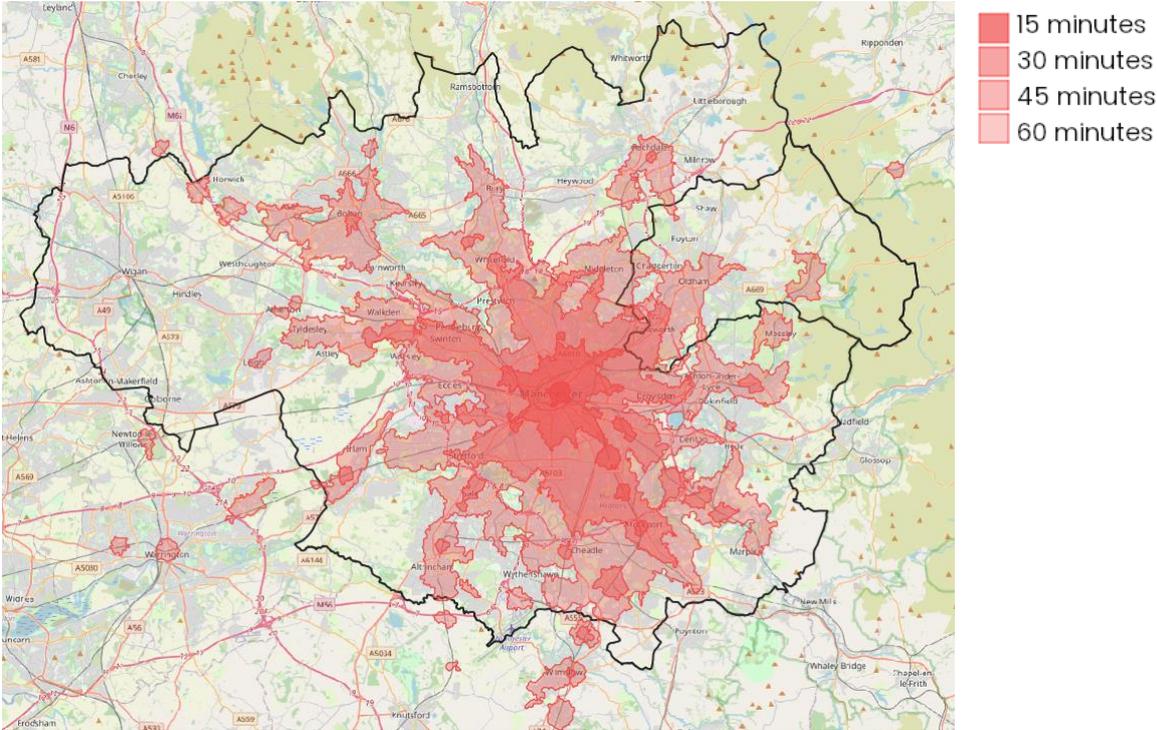
⁴ We take our list of sectors from the Foundational Economy, available here: <https://foundationaleconomy.com/activity-classification/>

The potential of agglomeration effects to boost the productivity of workers are partly limited by the public transport network. As noted above, the tram network does bring Oldham town centre just within 60 minutes of public transport to central Manchester. But good connectivity (access to the centre) extends further south into Stockport than it does east into Oldham. As parts of the periphery are relatively disconnected from the centre, this puts a dampener on agglomeration spillovers.

The town of Shaw in north Oldham is within 90 minutes of central Manchester, but only 10 miles away by distance. Contrast this with the public transport network of the capital, where 90 minutes on public transport can get a commuter as far south as Crawley, despite being 30 miles from central London.

Figure 8: How far you can travel from central Manchester using public transport, for 15, 30, 45, and 60 minute journeys

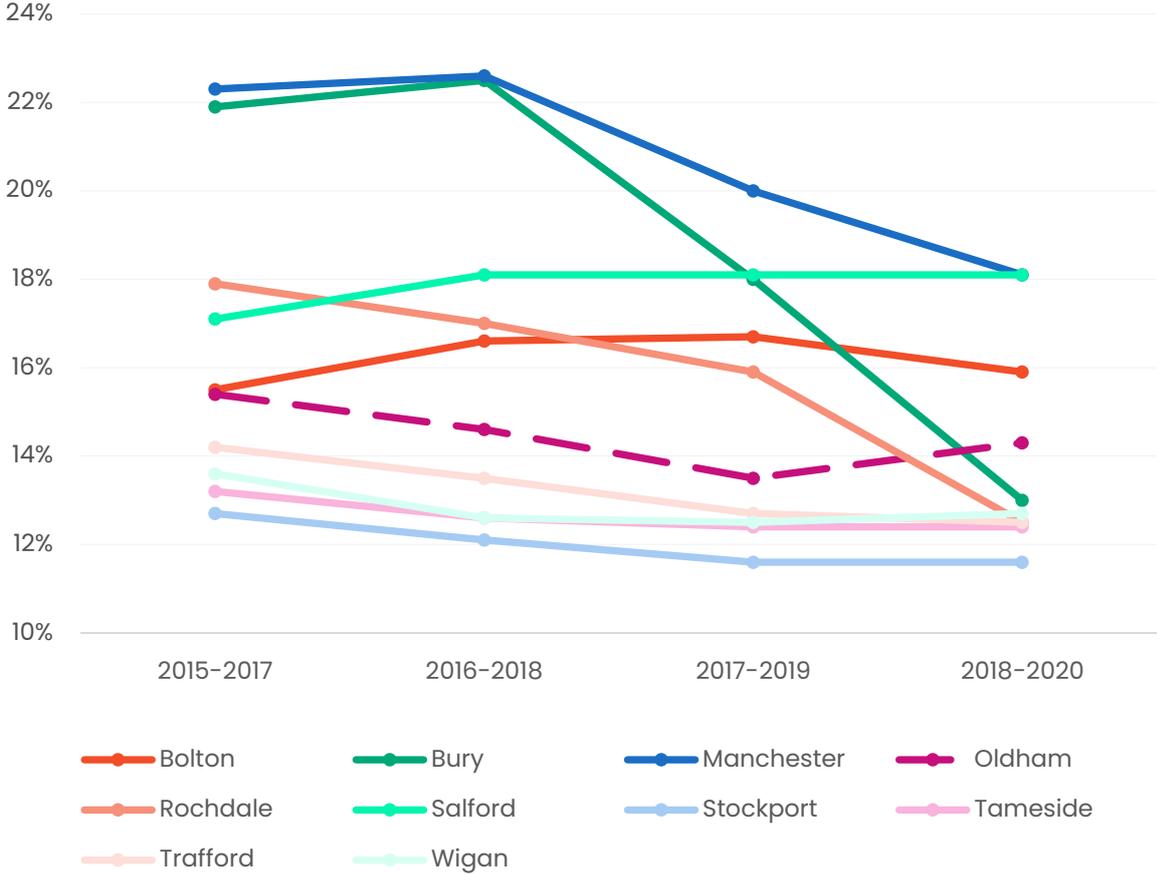
Source: Analysis of TravelTime data



Oldham’s economy lacks dynamism. Using the ONS data on business demography between 2015 and 2020, the start-up rate has remained around the Greater Manchester average. Start-ups as a share of active businesses was around 15% across the period, higher than Stockport and Wigan, but typically lower than Manchester and Salford.

Figure 9: Business start-ups as a share of total active businesses, 3-year moving average

Source: ONS Business Demography



These factors combine to make the economic future of Oldham challenging. To date, investment has poured into Manchester city centre, driving physical development and the relocation of firms. Leaders of the city have chosen to ride this wave, and at times have been accused of ignoring the impact on towns like Oldham. For example, business leaders in Oldham told us of the challenge of “yoyo workers” who came out to their town for entry level jobs but then returned to the city once they had gained experience. Respondents in our focus groups felt this concern too, with one telling us:

“I can see Manchester now, the skyline is a New York type skyline, and what worries me is like New York you almost get sort of ghetto pockets around the affluent area, and that worries me that it’ll happen to our town.”

Focus group respondents told us that job creation was a top priority for the future of Oldham, and they emphasised the role of the private sector. People wanted active policies to attract major employers, mentioning “cheap rent to big companies” and “investment for jobs with big companies”. When pressed on what that might look like, people proposed cash grants to large businesses (“like Tesla and Nike”) to incentivise them to choose Oldham over other areas and “discounted business rates for small business”, especially in the town centre and high street.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

This has a number of implications for a local playbook. First, local leaders need to take bold steps to grow the tradable sector and develop one or two nationally competitive clusters. These should be based on existing strategic assets in the area, and the Oldham Economic Review should be central to identifying underlying comparative advantages in their area. Our research indicates that advanced manufacturing and logistics are strong contenders, but leaders should work to find specialisms that can be the foundations of the area's future growth. In the short term, practical steps could include new inward investment programmes launched by MIDAS or a key account management approach being adopted by the council towards the top 10 private sector anchor employers. Longer term, the economic strategy should support the town's comparative advantage by mapping key local supply chains and removing barriers to growth.

Second, Oldham's leaders should seek to boost productivity in the foundational economy to increase wages and living standards. Retail, hospitality, and social care will not be sectors that drive a major growth in employment, but jobs in these areas should provide a solid base of well paid employment for residents. Steps should be taken to support foundational economy firms, many of them SMEs, to adopt new practices, secure new contracts, and attract more customers. A key priority should be to bring back a thriving market to the town centre, to boost footfall and create the conditions for a stronger leisure and retail offer on the high street. In the medium term, policymakers should consider working with SMEs to improve management practices and technology adoption, through targeted business support or subsidised training packages, perhaps leveraging the expertise of Oldham College.

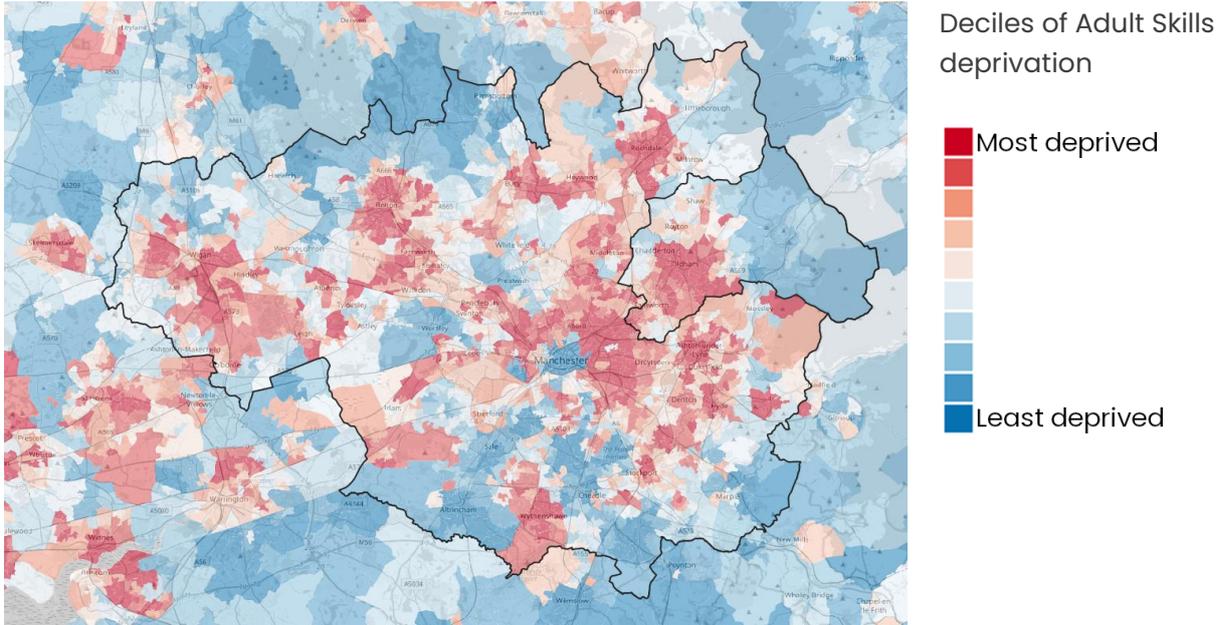
2) Spread opportunities and improve public services

When we asked about opportunity in Oldham, many people focussed on skills. Business and political leaders highlighted that young people lack basic Maths and English skills to get good jobs, and this feeds into broader challenges - including antisocial behaviour and low aspiration. Our statistical research supports this, highlighting that a third (33%) of LSOAs are in the most deprived decile for adult skills nationally. Only one neighbourhood is in the least deprived decile for adult skills based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Looking at a lower level of geography, we can see that Oldham has clear spatial inequalities regarding skills within the borough. Whereas much of the Western half of the borough ranks among the most deprived 20% of areas for skills, the less dense Eastern neighbourhoods like Delph and Uppermill rank in the top 20% for adult skills.

Figure 10: Rank for the Adult Skills domain of the IMD, LSOAs in Greater Manchester

Source: ONS, Index of Multiple Deprivation



Residents were optimistic this might change based on the quality of educational institutions in the area. In focus groups, respondents said that there are “quite good schools in Oldham” and that the town has seen “a lot of investment in education”. The recent announcement that Eton College intends to set up a specialist sixth form in the town by 2025 further reinforces this point.

This positive view of the local schools system is not wholly supported by the data. Oldham has the highest share of pupils attending underperforming primary schools (18%) in Greater Manchester, 5 percentage points higher than the average local authority in England. Access to good secondary schools in Oldham ranks better than other areas in Greater Manchester, but the share of pupils in underperforming secondary schools still remains 12% higher than the average for England.

School leaders themselves were also aware of missed opportunities. They told us that the education system does not work as one system to improve outcomes, and that opportunities to leverage assets are lost. In particular, the closing of schools at half term due to restrictive PFI agreements and a lack of available guidance was highlighted as a major missed opportunity to support enrichment activities, which might also serve as a diversion from antisocial behaviour.

At further education level, respondents said that “Oldham College always had a good rep.”, arguing that this could be built on, to create “something like what they have in London, opening doors for people, not everyone has to be a joiner, or builder, or plasterer.” But there are limits to how much Further Education providers can achieve. Many of the young people entering the College lack skills at level 1 and 2 (pre-GCSE) and require remedial training. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and will continue to be a challenge for the cohort that have missed education.

In our conversations with local leaders, respondents pointed to a gap in “soft skills”, with more articulate, middle class students standing out to employers. One employer who fought to look past these characteristics and employ local young people told us that “you’ve got to find the diamond in the rough”. This is compounded by the fact that young people in Oldham suffer from a lack of aspiration, linked to the decline of the area’s prospects in the past few decades and the fact that many role models move away instead of settling locally.

Employers who do engage with local colleges spoke positively, but faced real barriers in recruiting young people. When we asked about apprenticeships as a possible route, some employers told us that they were too complex and bureaucratic to be viable. We were told that apprenticeships had been limited in the public sector, which presents a problem in Oldham given the dominance of public sector organisations in the employer pool.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

These findings illustrate the need for Oldham to develop stronger links between the College and local employers, to both provide more job opportunities and foster a culture of aspiration. There are numerous ways in which leaders in Oldham could achieve this, ranging from low cost interventions such as regular jobs and apprenticeship fayres to longer term interventions such as the development of hubs to support flexi-apprenticeships (as pioneered by the BBC), more action by the Combined Authority to broker links between small businesses and training providers, and programmes to boost apprenticeships in public sector anchors like the NHS and Local Authority.

Local leaders also need to take action to improve school quality, to ensure that young people have the skills they need as they move towards the jobs market. In the short term, local leaders could develop a stronger partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation to identify how they could improve outcomes in their area - building on the Oldham Research School that provides evidenced based recommendations for all schools in Oldham. The area will also need to leverage its new designation as an Education Investment Area in the Levelling Up White Paper, ensuring that the Local Authority engages proactively with the Department for Education and strong governance is put in place.

3) Restore a sense of community, pride, and local belonging

When prompted to say how they would describe Oldham, the words people reached for told a story. Respondents in our focus groups said Oldham was a “dump”, “left behind”, “rubbish everywhere”, “grim”, “bleak”, “depressing”, “abandoned”, “getting greyer and greyer”, “dying”, “scary”. One said Oldham is “just left behind, nobody cares. They just let it rot, they can’t be bothered fixing it. They haven’t got any money to put it right.”

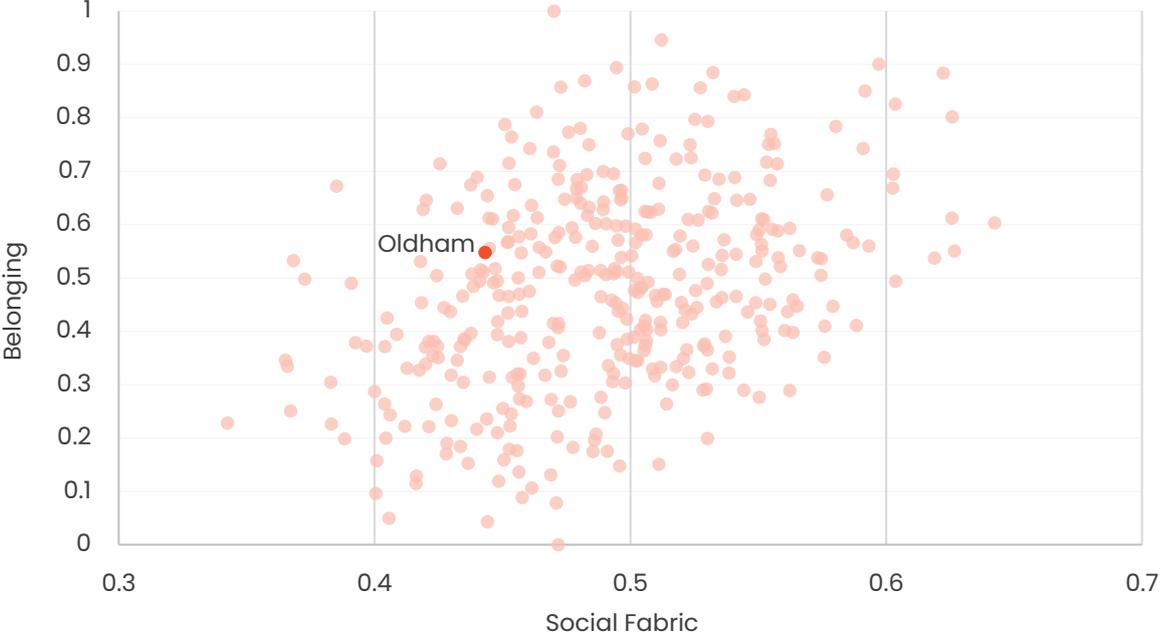
These impressions are also reflected in our empirical research. Onward’s Social Fabric Index finds that Oldham has a weak social fabric compared to the UK average, although middling for Greater Manchester as a whole - lower than Bury, Trafford, and Stockport but significantly higher than Salford and Tameside. Oldham’s score is low on positive social norms and economic value, but high on civic institutions - in some ways supporting earlier observations that the

quality of educational institutions like Oldham College stands at odds with a struggling economy and elevated levels of crime.

For example, Oldham ranks around average for Greater Manchester on indicators like the marriage rate and the proportion of households with children, and above average on indicators like religious participation and religiosity in general. On the other hand, the level of teen pregnancy is the second-highest in the Combined Authority, behind Salford.

Despite having relatively weak social fabric, however, Oldham has a relatively high score for the strength of belonging - the degree to which people feel like they are part of their neighbourhood.

Figure 11: Oldham has a fraying social fabric but a stronger sense of belonging
Source: Onward Social Fabric Index, Onward analysis of Understanding Society



Three themes emerged when we interrogated this lack of civic pride in our focus groups - safety, the town centre, and sport.

Crime and antisocial behaviour came up in all of our conversations in Oldham. Every individual, from senior public leaders to members of the public, made references to not feeling safe. In one of our focus groups, one mother said that there is “not a chance you walk round Oldham town centre on your own. I have a daughter and I’d rather let her walk round the Arndale [Centre]. I don’t think it’s safe. My lad is 16 in two weeks, and I’m still uncomfortable”.

People described the reasons for this lack of safety in direct terms. They had a perception that a lack of activities for young people meant that large groups of them congregated around tram stops, intimidating passengers - particularly young women. This emphasis on providing young people with opportunities meant that people were sceptical of plans to put up more CCTV or recruit more police officers. Our focus groups highlighted interventions to improve street safety

and, in doing so, create a stronger community - focused on “youth hubs” and “inclusion projects for young people”.

The other reasons people cited for not feeling safe were more subtle and implicit, and rooted in Oldham’s recent history. In focus groups, respondents provided examples of community tensions along racial and ethnic lines, with one participant saying “we let everybody from every nationality come into Oldham, and treat it like a dump - everything’s taken out and nothing is put back”. Another spoke of “different types of cultures coming in... seems to have changed the dynamic of the area, not in a good way.” Numerous references were made to the 2001 Oldham Riots, with one focus group participant saying that the tensions ‘all stemmed from the riots...it’s 20 years later and nothing has changed.” They also flagged tensions between the Roma community in areas where their number had grown significantly in recent years, such as Waterhead.

The town centre was mentioned almost as frequently as safety. When we asked open questions about Oldham, people vividly described the fortunes of the town centre. The past was seen as a better time - with thriving nightlife that made Oldham “the place to come to”, Tommyfield Market was described as “buzzing” and one member of the public proudly boasted that Oldham “used to have the most number of pubs in one town”. But the present was not seen in the same light, with participants repeatedly mentioning the lack of shops and restaurants alongside more general comments on safety.

At the same time, participants were envious about other areas which had ostensibly improved their town centres in recent years. One focus group participant said: “Rochdale is on par with Oldham, and it’s nice the new bit they’ve done”. Within Oldham, Royton was highlighted as somewhere that had improved, with one person saying “it has a nice high street, it’s got that village feel, it’s got green space”.

Participants acknowledged steps that had been taken to improve the town centre, and supported them. One participant said: “the Spindles proposals, moving Tommyfield market, upstairs into offices - sounds really amazing”. People also spoke about the need to “make Oldham town centre into a community area” with “bars and restaurants”, “more affluent bars, restaurants, eateries” and “no chains”.

At the same time, people’s criticism of the public realm extended more broadly to the streets outside the town centre and housing stock. In particular, Buy to Let properties were flagged as being a key concern in undermining a sense of pride in place. This was echoed by public leaders, who were frustrated by issues like fly tipping which had grown in recent years. The additional challenge of asylum seekers being put into hotels and low quality housing stock in the area was cited as undermining the cohesiveness of poorer neighbourhoods.

The third theme informing pride of place was sports. When we asked what made people proud of Oldham, or what used to, we got two answers - Oldham Athletic FC or Oldham Rugby League FC. These answers were often followed by expressions of frustration at the clubs’ current state, with Oldham Athletic FC having dropped from the Premiership to the fourth tier in recent decades and Oldham RLFC suffering relegation five years ago. In terms of the psychology of the area, the demise of these teams weighed heavily. These clubs were also repeatedly mentioned as an

embodiment of community, with sport bringing people together in a place that had seen a great deal of division.

In restoring a sense of community, Oldham has a reserve army in the form of over a thousand voluntary and community groups. Those we met with had built their organisations over years in the face of highly complex funding streams – cross-subsidising grants and contracts to ensure that they could continue delivering services. Many had introduced programmes to raise revenues, including Oldham Play Action Group, an arts and crafts shop, and Mockycandy, a cafe serving mocktails and boba tea. While some of these organisations had attempted Community Asset Transfers, they had found the experience bruising. Some had been deterred by opaque and difficult processes, and others had been involved in discussions for multiple years and struggled to secure the necessary paperwork to apply for the recent Community Ownership Fund. Some told us that elected councillors had made their work more challenging, ‘politicising’ programmes like Big Local and preferencing their networks.

Throughout Oldham, religious groups formed a core part of the social fabric. Community groups we met spoke of positive collaborations between churches and mosques, and particularly active churches in ethnic minority communities. Walking around Oldham it is difficult not to be struck by the high number of churches and civic buildings, which offer opportunities as community spaces.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

Local leaders will need to actively take steps to build civic capacity, focusing on the institutions that bring people together to strengthen the civic infrastructure of the town. Initial steps could focus on an increase in community assets, through better public land data transparency and a more comprehensive and updated register of Assets of Community Value. The Council could also significantly accelerate Community Asset Transfer, working with bodies like Locality and Power to Change to secure maximum investment from the second round of the Community Ownership Fund. In the long term, local leaders could develop proposals to bring local sports clubs into community ownership.

Cutting crime is also a clear priority which will make or break wider efforts to level Oldham up. A short term step to provide activities for young people might involve bringing together youth services into Youth Hubs in strategic locations in areas with particular challenges. In the medium term, leaders could support the recruitment of PCSOs to tackle anti-social behaviour. The local police, whose police and crime commissioner is the Greater Manchester Mayor, could also invest in a “broken windows” policing strategy to identify and rectify public realm issues quickly and rebuild pride of place.

But these steps do not change the need to improve the built environment and the town centre. Local leaders could explore steps to tackle eyesore derelict buildings, through the better use of Repair Notices and Section 215 notices. The successful regeneration of the town centre shopping area is a key target, and the invitation to tender for a private operator should be bold and innovative to attract an organisation with high hopes for the area.

4) Empower local leaders and communities

Lots of groups we spoke to assigned some blame for Oldham's position to the Local Authority. Focus group participants told us that the council was "not doing anything to change things" and highlighted that they didn't "get very good press". Some recognised that the council's hands were partially tied, arguing that "we were skint during the Cameron years" and that the "council [has] got to do what government tells them to do". In particular, we heard criticism of council plans constantly chopping and changing - including the launch of numerous master plans or strategies, which tested community patience. This was compounded by a feeling that council staff were removed from the lived experiences of the area, with many senior officers not living or spending time locally. A high level of churn in senior public positions was perceived to be a challenge, making it difficult to build relationships within the community and giving public leaders a shorter time horizon for their ambitions. One interviewee told us they needed to "agree on a plan and stick to it."

These criticisms pointed to the need for broader cross sectoral leadership. One school leader spoke of the need for joined up thinking, bringing together leaders of different public, private, and charitable bodies. Initiatives like the Town Board had been helpful in bringing together investment plans, but lacked credibility moving forward given they were so close to the council. Private sector leaders also spoke of the need for a more joined up business community - and again pointed to Rochdale as an example of what works well, with weekly breakfasts of business leaders a good example of effective collaboration.

In our discussions, regional leadership was felt to be either peripheral or unhelpful. Mentions of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) by the public were primarily frustrations at the recent debate over the Clean Air Zone, with criticism targeted at Mayor Andy Burnham. Public leaders expressed disappointment with the deal they got from the GMCA, and pointed to the Oldham Economic Review as a recognition that regional leadership would not be able to cater to the specific needs of Oldham as a place.

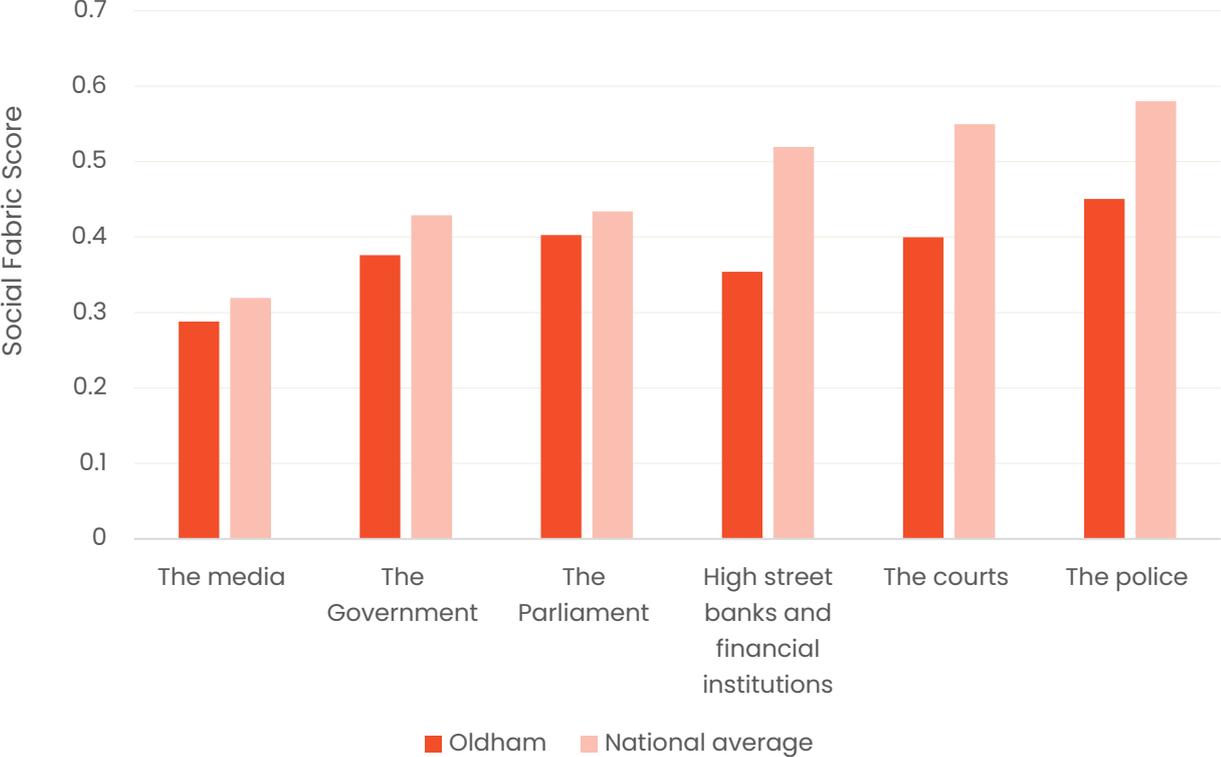
Our previous work on attitudes towards civic institutions and levels of generalised trust bear this out. Both Oldham constituencies have very low levels of trust, based on our MRP estimates. Of the 632 British constituencies, Oldham East ranks 501st (the 79th percentile) and Oldham West ranks even lower at 533 (less trusting than the top 88% of constituencies).⁵

Oldham also scores below average for trust in civic institutions. As part of our Social Fabric Index, we estimated the relative level of trust in institutions for every local authority, based on the British Social Attitudes Survey. Oldham scores below average for Great Britain on every measure of trust, including trust in the media, the police, the courts, and government.

⁵ Onward (2022) The Good Life

Figure 12: Trust in institutions

Source: Onward (2020) *The State of Our Social Fabric*: Note: The survey question asked, "I will name a list of institutions. For each, please indicate whether you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it."



What might this mean for the local playbook?

These findings suggest that local leaders should find new ways of collectively organising in order to steward a process of change. This could take the form of a new cross-sectoral institution to take forward recommendations from the Oldham Economic Review, possibly modelled on Altrincham Forward, created by Trafford Council in 2011 to revitalise the town. A specific civil society board, including colleges, schools, faith institutions like churches and mosques, and business associations could also be convened to tackle the issue of anti-social behaviour.

Oldham’s leaders could also make better use of hyperlocal forms of governance. Only 19.2% of Oldham’s population are covered by a parish council - steps to establish more of them could provide new forms of organisation, particularly in the town of Oldham itself. A Business Improvement District in the town centre, or around more affluent high streets like those in Saddleworth, could also bring together members of the business community to improve public safety and invest in the public realm.

Conclusion

Oldham is a town in need of levelling up. When we asked people in Oldham about the term, it was not a remote Westminster slogan. Most understood what it meant. It is “about northern towns and cities, levelling them up so they’re more affluent and they have more opportunities” and “levelling up poorer parts of towns, more like rich areas”. It is about “trying to get rid of the North-South divide” and “balancing things out, making things a bit more equal”, bringing in “more businesses, more opportunities, more of a community, more small businesses, more restaurants and coffee shops.”

And they felt that it was necessary. Because, in their words, “towns have been left behind..... big cities are taking over”. This resentment of cities was striking: “Oldham, Bolton, Bury, all falling in the same trap. The Trafford Centre and Manchester are sucking all the life out of it.” London is “like a different world”. If you go down to London, “seeing the way people live there, it’s like a permanent holiday.”

But people were more negative about the likelihood of success. “Of course it’s a good thing, but it’s not going to happen”, said one; “it won’t have an immediate effect” said another. Several people said that places like Oldham “need a miracle”. One was nervous about the wrong type of levelling up: “I’d hate for us to be like down south. It’s too expensive, too many buildings, nobody speaks to each other.” This may reflect ingrained cynicism about political promises: people agreed when one participant said “it is just political speak, a way to get votes in.”

This is why delivery for Oldham is so important. People in the town are frustrated by what they see as unkept promises, and want to see rapid results. It is unlikely that this delivery will be driven from Whitehall. The ideas we’ve suggested above, and will develop into a full prototype methodology as our Levelling Up In Practice programme develops, attempt to identify a direction of travel for local leaders.

Our key finding in Oldham was of latent potential. As one interviewee told us, “we have a ferrari shell but by god have we had our engine ripped out”. In ten years, it is the actions of local leaders that will determine whether the area rediscovers its sports car spirit.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1 - Focus Groups

This is a short overview of two focus groups that Onward moderated in Oldham on the evening of 3 February 2022. Participants were BC1 in the first group and C2D in the second, with an even mix of Leave/Remain and Con/Lab 2019 voters. All of them lived within Oldham borough itself.

1. How do people define levelling up?

- Most people get what levelling up means. It is “about northern towns and cities, levelling them up so they’re more affluent and they have more opportunities” and “levelling up poorer parts of towns, more like rich areas”. It is about “trying to get rid of the North-South divide” and “bringing the Northern part of the country in line with the South in terms of finances”. It means “balancing things out, making things a bit more equal” and bringing in “more businesses, more opportunities, more of a community, more small businesses, more restaurants and coffee shops.”
- This is necessary because “towns have been left behind. Oldham 20 or 30 years ago was great, now places like Rochdale and Bury a dump. The big cities are taking over”. Resentment of cities was striking. “Oldham, Bolton, Bury, all falling in the same trap. The Trafford Centre and Manchester are sucking all the life out of it.” London is “like a different world”. If you go down to London, “seeing the way people live there, it’s like a permanent holiday over there.” Another said: “I’ve got a friend from Berkshire and she could not believe the trains that were still running here.”
- People are downbeat about the likelihood of success. “Of course it’s a good thing, but it’s not going to happen”, said one; “it won’t have an immediate effect” said another. Several people said that places like Oldham “need a miracle” and said variations of “it’s not going to happen in my lifetime”. One was nervous about the wrong type of levelling up: “I’d hate for us to be like down south. I’d hate to live down south. It’s too expensive, too many buildings, nobody speaks to each other.” This may be ingrained cynicism about political promises: people murmured agreement when one said “it is just political speak, a way to get votes in.”

2. How do people define good places?

We asked the participants to do an exercise where they described the characteristics of a “good place” to live, grow up in and work. All of the groups had a long list of characteristics including jobs and businesses, but the discussion invariably focused invariably on three things:

1. A good town centre. People focused on local amenities like bars, restaurants, good shops and leisure facilities. One participant mentioned Royton because it had “a nice high street, it’s got that village feel, it’s got green space”. Others mentioned the renovation of Rochdale’s shopping centre enviously.
2. Safe neighbourhoods. Both groups said good places were defined by a “safer environment” and “safety”, with “more of a police presence, to make streets safer for your children going out.” This was a running theme throughout both sessions.
3. A sense of community. Related to crime was a sense of community. This was seen as a natural complement to safer streets - “one begets the other doesn’t it... if you have a sense of community, safety follows on from that” and “my parents used to leave their

doors unlocked. I don't even talk to my neighbour." The football club was repeatedly mentioned as an embodiment of community, with sport being a way to bring people together.

3. How do people feel about their place - Oldham?

- When prompted to say how they would describe Oldham, the words people reached for told a story: "dump", "left behind", "rubbish everywhere", "grim", "bleak", "depressing", "abandoned", "getting greyer and greyer", "dying", "scary". One said Oldham is "just left behind, nobody cares. Just let it rot, they can't be bothered fixing it. They haven't got any money to put it right." The perceived cause of this decline is three strongly interlinked issues: street safety, public transport, and the draining influence of big cities.
- People feel extremely unsafe in Oldham. One mother said there is "not a chance you walk round Oldham Town Centre on your own. I have a daughter and I'd rather let her walk round the Arndale [Centre]. I don't think it's safe. My lad is 16 in two weeks, and I'm still uncomfortable". This was universally agreed with by all of our participants with a particular focus on young women's safety.
- This was partly related to young men hanging around who have "no respect" for the town and drop rubbish and leave it "dirty", while also being an intimidating presence on the streets. One said: "You can put these nice things in but kids just wreck them. They've got nothing to do." This problem of loitering and intimidation was particularly associated with the tramline. Most participants said they did not use the tram at night. One female participant said "you take your life into your hands for a £3.60 return...As a lady, I wouldn't go on my own into Ashton, into Oldham".
- This fed into a wider feeling that the tram had been a negative development for Oldham, as it has allowed more people to leave Oldham shop and work, in their view undermining the local economy. One participant said: "The town centre was on the edge and when the tram came, it pushed it over." Another defined Oldham's problems in the following way: "more and more people starting to move out, and people moving in are treating it like a dump."
- Separately, there is a high level of hostility to the Clean Air Zone, which was seen as punishing places like Oldham that have residents and businesses that rely heavily on cars. There was universal condemnation of the CAZ for both groups.

4. Underlying strengths

- History. There is a deep sense of latent pride for Oldham. People spoke warmly of the history of Oldham, including its industrial heritage and its status as a place people wanted to come to, to go out and to come to the market. "Oldham used to be the place to come to", said one. Oldham "used to be the hub of the North West, with thousands of mills", said another. The "market used to be buzzing - tommyfield market" and Oldham "used to have the most number of pubs in one town".
- Location. People also think that Oldham's easy proximity to both rural and city spaces is a great strength. One defined Oldham with the word "location", elaborating that he meant the combination of "countryside and Manchester" on the doorstep. Many agreed and mentioned specific places: Saddleworth, Woodhouses, and Upper Mill. Another said "you

don't have to travel far" and several mentioned easy access to the M60. A few people mentioned housing, saying "you get more for your money."

- Education. Education is also seen as a great strength. The less well off (C2D) participants in particular said that there are "quite good schools in Oldham" and that the town has seen "a lot of investment in education". They also said that "Oldham College always had a good rep." They thought that this could be built on, to create "something like what they have in London, opening doors for people, not everyone has to be a joiner, or builder, or plasterer." However there was a desire for primary schools to do more to show children the importance of "respect" to avoid problems when they leave school.

5. Who is responsible for Oldham's fortunes?

- When asked what is stopping Oldham from being successful, most people quickly said "the council". There is a sense that the council has been held back by infighting and a failure to deliver on its promises. "The council doesn't get very good press", said one, "there's a surprise, politicians not fulfilling their promises". The council is "not doing anything to change things". This was particularly directed towards the decision to move the Tommyfield market and repeated failures to regenerate the Spindles shopping centre.
- However people recognised that the council's hands are tied in some respects by others. People said that it was "all down to the government. We were skint during the Cameron years, then suddenly we found money for covid" and argued that the "council [has] got to do what government tells them to do". However there was a perception that the lack of interest in Oldham was partly due to local leadership - "they give council money to do it [regenerate Oldham], and at the moment they don't have a good enough reputation".
- Finally there was a perception that part of Oldham's problem was its diverse community. There was an undercurrent of racial tension to some of the discussion about crime and young people. One participant said "we let everybody from every nationality come into oldham, treat it like a dump, everythings taken out and nothing is put back". Another spoke of "different types of cultures coming in... seems to have changed the dynamic of the area, not in a good way."

6. What would people do to level up Oldham?

When asked to consider what they would do to level up Oldham, the groups were optimistic. "Anything is possible, it's a community effort, it's a mindset", said one. They focused heavily in four key areas:

1. Job creation. People wanted active policies to bring major employers to Oldham to offer people good jobs locally. People spoke of "cheap rent to big companies", "investment for jobs with big companies". When pressed on what that might look like, people proposed cash grants to large businesses ("like Tesla and Nike") to incentivise them to choose Oldham over other areas and "discounted business rates for small business", especially in the town centre and high street.
2. Community development. Interventions to improve street safety and, in doing so, create a stronger community. Police were mentioned but this focused much more on "youth hubs" and "inclusion projects for young people". There was also a sense that Oldham

could better use its historic buildings, with both groups mentioning the need to develop “the old mills”, and its football club to drive some of this.

3. Town centre regeneration. Aligned to community development was town centre regeneration. The proposed scheme to develop Spindles Market was well known and liked. One participant said: “the Spindles proposals, moving Tommyfield market, upstairs into offices - sounds really amazing”. This was partly informed by recent schemes in Rochdale and Bury. One person said: “Rochdale is on par with Oldham, and it’s nice the new bit they’ve done”. People also spoke about the need to “make Oldham town centre into a community area” with “bars and restaurants”, “more affluent bars, restaurants, eateries” and “no chains”. There was also a desire to extend the tram to Ashton, so that people could come to and from neighbouring suburbs easily rather than going into Manchester itself.