Where next?
The first open conference of the Oldham Learning Cooperative Partnership (OLCP) was held on Thursday 17 October in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Oldham and it drew together over 100 leaders and senior managers from schools and academies, colleges and other learning providers, as well as the business community and Borough Council. The conference was arranged jointly by a committed group of senior leaders from the Oldham leadership networks of early years, primary, secondary, special and further education as well as the Council. The event set out to:

• inform delegates and engage a much wider group in the developing Partnership and gain their enthusiasm and commitment to it
• consult on ideas and proposals so that the Partnership could build on strong and shared foundations

Why do we need the Partnership?
The Partnership is needed to fill a vital role in the future of Oldham. It will give leadership in bringing together the different interests of early years’ settings, schools, colleges, business and local government. It has to be focused on practicalities - working out shared plans and action especially at the boundaries where it is vital that these different interest work together to get things right. They all have an overall shared responsibility - to provide the very best opportunities for learning to every child and young person in Oldham - and that cannot be achieved if everyone works in isolation.

What will the Partnership do?
The Conference outlined in more detail how the Partnership would set about:

• working systematically for all the children and young people in Oldham by focusing on the key issues, analysing the data and evidence, delivering improvements and measuring the benefits
• sharing purpose and working cooperatively – by aligning the partner organisations, combining efforts, sharing assets and helping children and young people to play a full part alongside adults
• seeking to be ground-breaking and reflecting on the educational and skills achievements, performance and challenges for Oldham, learning from evidence from elsewhere as well as from within our own community
• being collectively accountable for the outcomes, developing and growing the partnership together for the good of all young people in the borough and their families.

What will the priorities be for the Partnership?
The Conference Booklet sets out in more detail the proposed aims, key objectives and working model of the Partnership. The six key objectives show the areas where the Partnership believes it should focus its attention:

1. Improve the number of children starting school ready to learn and attaining high levels of educational achievement.
2. Define, improve and broaden the learning offer and pathways.
3. Strive to ensure that all learning settings are good or outstanding and help those in categories to recover.
4. Secure effective transitions from early years through to adulthood and employment.
5. Ensure young people leaving school have an advantage in highly competitive markets by linking education and skills more closely to employability and employment.
6. Prepare for and deliver the Oldham Youth Guarantee.

The Partnership wants to avoid duplicating work already being tackled by other organisations, networks and groups. So it will carefully map who is doing what in each of these six key areas and work with them to make sure that gaps are filled and time, energy and resources are used to best advantage for children, young people and the community.

What happened at the Conference and what came out of it?
A detailed summary of the Conference presentations and the feedback from delegates is set out in the following pages so that those who were unable to attend can begin to appreciate the significance of this first Conference. The Partnership has already begun to take account of the views expressed at the Conference and is adapting accordingly.
Oldham – Our place of learning

Introduction
Anne Redmond - Special School Head

Ayesha Khan and Haroon Ahmed: two primary age children with leadership responsibility in their own school asked the adults at the conference to take account of all the children and young people of Oldham and build their interests into the Oldham Learning Cooperative Partnership.

“Remember, together we can achieve more than we can on our own.”
(Haroon Ahmed) [Getting to know Oldham]

The importance of partnership working in Oldham
Michael Jameson, Executive Director Commissioning, Oldham Council

This conference is a critical milestone opening up the possibility of shaping the future of education at a time of major change in national policy, relationships and expectations – in education but also around welfare, reform, economic change and social upheaval. The challenges for Oldham are growing. In spite of our best efforts so far, almost half of our 16 year olds leave school without the minimum standards of 5 GCSEs including English and Maths; we have fewer students going on to higher education and insufficient numbers of young people possessing quality vocational skills to succeed in the world of work; internationally we are reported to be falling behind in basic skills and in Oldham, adult unemployment rates and lack of jobs are disproportionately high in the Greater Manchester area; finally almost half of our children start school not ready to learn – a proportion that is below regional levels. These challenges cannot be addressed by schools alone. We have improved… but we can and must do even more together in the future. The OLCP booklet in the conference pack spells out 6 objectives that give us its focus for action:

1. Improve the number of children starting school ready to learn and attaining high levels of educational achievement.
2. Define, improve and broaden the learning offer and pathways.
3. Strive to ensure that all learning settings are good or outstanding and help those in categories to recover.
4. Secure effective transitions from early years through to adulthood and employment.
5. Ensure young people leaving school have an advantage in highly competitive markets.
6. Secure effective transitions from early years through to adulthood and employment.

This proposal for a new OLCP puts education and skills at the heart of the future of Oldham and brings phases and ages together with the world of employment. This is a platform for improvement. Instead of managing destinies on our own we will work together. This is not the local authority asserting control – this has to be a whole system approach reflecting shared values and objectives. It is about your involvement.

Lisa Needham – Chair of Primary Heads

Many of us believe strongly in the improvement in learning and opportunity for Oldham children and young people and we recognise the value of partnership. But there is a cost to making partnership work so we must be clear what kind of partnership will really work. It has to be deep, purposeful and focused on joint practice, driven by a sense of collective moral purpose that cares for all children across Oldham, not just our own. Primary heads are working towards a greater sense of mutual accountability as well as engaging in innovative developments. With Health and other Early Years services, we are sharpening our capacity to improve, through shared assessment leading to better and better outcomes. Our aim must be to ensure that every child is ready for learning as they enter school. Or again, the transition from primary to secondary is another critical point for both primary and secondary schools – we have a shared accountability for making learning transitions work well. In the primary sector we already have a rich variety of partnerships and these continue to evolve as we recognise the importance of working on local issues and sharing workloads.

So, building on this, we cannot pull back or make excuses about time, work pressure, financial problems or competition getting in the way – these are real pressures but so are the needs of children in a changing and competitive world.

Matthew Milburn – Secondary School Head

We face massive changes. School have been given much greater freedom and the school system is increasingly fragmented with the traditional roles of the local authority substantially reduced. There is a need for an over-arching body to ensure that every young person has access to good quality education and a good start in life. We cannot pull the drawbridge up and so contribute to fracturing the system that every young person has access to good quality education and a good start in life. We cannot pull the drawbridge up and so contribute to fracturing the system and condemning the most vulnerable to falling through the gaps. We are all one step away from being seen as “vulnerable”. We need to understand how fragile our schools and the wider education system have become. We have got to recognise our shared responsibility and accept a shared moral purpose. “This is absolutely not about a reinvented local authority clinging to a remnant of power or influence – but it is about forging a new and genuine relationship in the interests of the children we serve, and in the interests of each other.” “It is about creating a system that is more robust, self-sustaining and resilient.” This is exemplified by the peer review programme developing across special and secondary schools with the two colleges in Oldham. It is robust and open to scrutiny and involves the local authority, diocese or academy sponsor as partners. This process will work but only if leaders buy into the trust, professionalism and integrity that a self-sustaining school improvement partnership requires.

Headteachers have been the architects of this peer review, the architects of their own future. “Today is about growing up, accepting our responsibility, taking ownership and becoming the architects of a new partnership in the interests of all children.”
David Benstead  
Chair of Oldham Business Leadership Group

The work of teachers is tough and challenging. So is the work of employers and business leaders not least in terms of the recruitment of people. They are looking for “rounded and grounded individuals” with positive attitudes to work…people who have had good careers advice. National reports regularly reflect these and similar complaints. In Oldham the Business Leaders Group (OBLG) wants to take a share in ownership of these issues to collaborate and make a difference. The objectives in the conference pack don’t cover all the challenges we face. Technological developments will have a big impact.

Young people are entering the employment market without some traditional skills and qualities but with new and different ones and the workplace has got to change and make allowances for this. The OBLG is passionate about Oldham – we want Oldham to be seen as a great place to live and work and we have started to do something. We have a key theme of encouraging and enabling learning and within that, four objectives:

1. Build greater careers awareness and stronger careers pathways to prepare students for ‘in-demand’ jobs;
2. Help to align the education and training programmes with industry and business needs, to upgrade the skills of current workers, re-tool job seekers for ‘in-demand’ careers and provide students with the competencies necessary for success;
3. Engage employers in the setting of curriculum standards and programmes of study as well as providing coaches and mentors;
4. Expose teachers and students to the world of work and related learning experiences. These are being tackled in various ways – Primary Engineer; Youth Network; Young Enterprise; Business Awards; Youth Zone; Get Oldham Working. We need to re-design our partnership working, building on the willingness here in the conference.
Alun Francis - Principal Oldham College

There are some painful things that our partnership needs to address if it is to have an impact. Communities can be driven by fear and the need to defend themselves. Being separate and autonomous can be uncomfortable and bonding through partnership may make us feel better. However, we must understand why the landscape is changing and when we do we will realise that we need different forms of partnership from those we have had in the past. Governments have not been convinced that partnerships like ours can change things quickly or radically enough. Policy innovations like Free Schools and Academies are meant to challenge us and make us feel uncomfortable. One problem is that schools and colleges are set up to produce qualifications and not competence with a focus on regulation and not education. Performance improves but outcomes are not improving at the same rate and in some respects they are getting worse. 10% fewer young people go on to university than in Trafford or Stockport; twenty times fewer jobs come to north Manchester compared with the south. “However well we have done the outcomes are not good enough.

These are things that matter in shaping the future of the town” The big issue is not so much fragmentation of providers but curriculum reform. The majority of the most vulnerable attend Oldham College and vocational providers - and their choices are limited. Current vocational programmes are challenging and expectations are high. However, over 70% of students coming to Oldham College operate at just Level 1 in Literacy and over 80% in Numeracy. We improve their performance during college courses but not in Literacy and Numeracy. “Surely between us we should be able to get the vast majority of young people literate and numerate?” These young people don’t have much of a chance – they are only going to go into low skill and low pay jobs. Vocational qualifications are being stripped out of the system” because they are of no economic value, they’re useless in terms of access to the labour market”. You cannot separate out the vocational from the academic – they have got to be mixed. “If we are to improve outcomes for young people these are the kinds of challenges we are going to have to address and they are not without pain. “The structure of our qualifications will not be the same. We cannot allow the situation to continue in which 40% of adults in Oldham are functionally illiterate. To Oldham College operate at just Level 1 in Literacy and over 80% in Numeracy. We improve their performance during college courses but not in Literacy and Numeracy. “Surely between us we should be able to get the vast majority of young people literate and numerate?” These young people don’t have much of a chance – they are only going to go into low skill and low pay jobs. Vocational qualifications are being stripped out of the system” because they are of no economic value, they’re useless in terms of access to the labour market”. You cannot separate out the vocational from the academic – they have got to be mixed. “If we are to improve outcomes for young people these are the kinds of challenges we are going to have to address and they are not without pain. “The structure of our qualifications will not be the same. We cannot allow the situation to continue in which 40% of adults in Oldham are functionally illiterate.

Can we teach them to be literate?

Securing Oldham’s Future
Jim McMahon – Leader of Oldham Council

Impressed by the challenge that has emerged in the conference. We are not doing enough to raise the aspirations of young people, to understand young people and their communities and how they tick. Politicians can give leadership and support but must not interfere. Cooperative approaches are emerging that can empower people and not control or crush them, giving them a stake in making the town better than it is. Raising standards is important but unless we do something too many people will get into a rut for the rest of their lives. Ben Brierley from Failsworth: “If we want to climb we have first to make our own ladders.” We have been given the resources and we must do better. There are diminishing returns in our investments which produce stubborn levels of unemployment and fixed life chances in Oldham, particularly for young people. We all need to get “our bit” right. If we pull together with enthusiasm and passion we could really make a difference in this town. We could turn round the signs of neglect and lack of confidence – we do that only if we empower people to step up. If I have got one ambition for today it is that everybody here will leave this room feeling that “it is my job to fix Oldham”. This is about people and communities and being part of that journey brings rewards that are very, very significant. We will know when we have succeeded when people in Oldham will have ambitions and expectations far beyond the present.

Making partnerships work
David Cracknell, Special Adviser
University of Chester, Professor of Education

OLCP Conference Group Discussions

Some emerging themes

In the group discussions there was a strong drive to do the best for children, young people, families, communities, the economy and broader development of Oldham. Working together does have a role in achieving this. Many very specific reactions emerged to things said by speakers at the conference with a rich range of comment – this is clearly a conference of listeners and responders. Six themes emerged from a quick initial review:

1. Community and family focus recognising the complexities of Oldham.
2. Transitions on each rung of the learning and employment ladder.
3. Competition working out how to handle this alongside the commitment to collaboration and cooperation - commitment and trust is vital.
4. Curriculum development – taking account of learning for living and the development of the whole person. Literacy and other
5. Communication building on the basis of tolerance of difference.
6. Action needed - what is going to make it work.

Subsequent analysis of feedback from group sessions initial views on OLCP

- Majority realised partnership working needed in order to better attainment standards and different stakeholders uniting to make a difference in the current climate
- Candid presentations demonstrating key areas of concern that need working on like literacy, numeracy, aspirations of children, children ‘ready to learn and work’
- Many are willing to offer support and involvement while others wanted more information in terms of approach, detail
- How will a multi partnership operate on a practical level and its make up
- Some collaborative partnership working prevalent, how will these be utilised
- Some sceptical stating the education system itself is broken and needs reformation, therefore, will this make any difference or improve education standards
- Interactive sessions created debate, idea sharing on Oldham’s challenges and the need to take sort of urgent action and the OLCP could be this driver

Areas for OLCP to consider moving forward

- Essential that all stakeholders are involved, empowered to have a voice to ensure representation from all sectors from early years to post 16 education providers
- Inclusion of parents and students vital as well as non-traditional players like the wider community, businesses, community and group leaders
- The need for commitment, trust, respect amongst stakeholders and openness
- Clearly defined actions/outcomes with time frames (action plan) and measures
- Governance, accountability, transparency developed and agreed by all partners as well as a strong leader with vision to spearhead the OLCP and cement it
- A common language developed and understood by all stakeholders spearheading a common collective interest
• Understanding the changing ‘landscape’, transitions of educational institutions and how this impacts children moving through the educational system and experience
• Creating an identity and link between the different stages of education/experience and linking this to the real world and its opportunities i.e. business, careers, advice
• Expanding the collaborative partnerships already in existence
• A collective moral, social responsibility to propel all children to succeed including vulnerable groups and creating an environment for children to aspire, have ambitions
• Communicate task groups established in order to allow wider multi partnership working (this needs to move quickly) as many came across this for the first time

Challenges for OLCP to consider
• Some perceived it to be too large in scope, needing smaller groups working throughout the borough in priority areas
• The structural national framework of Ofsted, league tables quintessentially impacts time, commitment and priority of schools to this rather than to commit to the OLCP
• The national government agenda potentially conflicting with Oldham’s agenda
• Isolation working and fragmentation of education providers
• Many different partners with different interests, can we reach a collective interest/agreement
• Scepticism of LA and its full role in this and powers
• Funding, commitment and sustainability in the long term
• The social fabric, a malaise in society, community; parents, children that have no ambitions, aspirations or intention to learn, work, how do we turn this tide
• Constructive challenging and support to partners who fail to deliver
• Why it matters, will it make a difference, how do we measure success especially in light of soft skills, changing of social attitudes and achievement levels
• The ‘dividend’ or benefits to partners that join or support the OLCP venture

Partnership Matters – Wider Perspectives
David Cracknell - University of Chester - Special Adviser

Each partnership development has unique opportunities and challenges – Oldham is no different. You are the learning leaders of Oldham and partnership should never be off your agenda. Here are some pointers from research and experience to suggest what makes an effective partnership.

1. Purpose: we need to be clear about the purpose of our partnership. We will be concerned with improving learning, living and future prospects in Oldham. Purpose is better understood as you discover what matters through working it out.

2. People: we need encouragement and support as well as exhortation and challenge. Our practice needs to be values-driven and to reflect a firm stance that people genuinely matter as individuals. We have been in contact with other partnerships – e.g. Manchester Schools Alliance and Robert Owen Group of schools in Hereford and Worcestershire. They are underpinned by explicit guiding values such as values of: cooperation, loyalty, altruism, reciprocity, solidarity and trust. Values-driven motivation should not be taken for granted.

3. Power: the power of partnerships starts with possibilities and builds on the strength derived from working together. The OLPC is not a take-over but rather an umbrella under which existing groups and networks - specialist, sector, area or Oldham-wide groups - can be nurtured and empowered - they are the arms and legs of partnership to change the metaphor. We need to move forward from a loose alliance to a formal structure that has bite and clarity. The ambition of this Partnership is ground-breaking in its breadth of vision – aiming to go deep and wide, long-term and robust, with a commitment to being inclusive and not just narrowly focused or short-term in its ambitions.

4. Preparation: we need to have the right mixture of fast and slow thinking, re-framing our understanding; taking care about how we start our partnership journey together, taking advice on practical partnership working from wherever we can get it – e.g. “don’t do it unless you have to’; budget more time than you expect; pay attention to communications; give your representatives sufficient freedom to act…” (“Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

5. Performance: partnership can bring a “dividend” or “pay-back” at all levels. With cooperative and democratic engagement and the careful use of scaffolding (formal structures and agreed processes and practices to support growth) we know we can build excellence upon already strong foundations. We can produce an inclusive and collaborative framework that is strong, resilient and sustainable. Part of this construction process involves building capacity for individuals, organisations and our wider system – capacity for more and better learning, living and leading as we move towards a shared future. Children and young people themselves should feature more prominently than they do now in the Partnership – the vision should be theirs as well as one that we claim on their behalf.
What do we need to do next?

Jayne Clarke - Principal Oldham Sixth Form College

(Interactive Session and Panel Q&A)
The Partnership must now focus on practicalities – “it can’t be all good intentions, it can’t be all discussion, it needs to involve some action.” No one is short of things to do and we have many commitments but we have to be mindful of longer term implications, the consequences of not working together and of not taking action. If this Partnership is to be worthwhile, it has to make a difference for all the young people in Oldham. “We have many challenges to face together. It’s no good hoping they are going to go away. It is time to make a commitment to action now.”

John Meagher - Chair of Secondary Heads

Q: The principle of partnership is great but what is it going to achieve?
It is really up to every person in this room to decide what this Partnership is going to achieve – it could be measurable, better qualifications, better health (e.g. teeth), or about making better citizens but for me it is especially about giving young people aspirations to go out and achieve the best they can. Partnership is the best way to do this. It is very easy to pull up the drawbridge and go into isolationism because of all the challenges we are facing. But that does not give us strength and is summed up by the young man who opened the conference when he said that as a team we could do better and get more out of it. So the Partnership is for us to create and make it a success.

Cllr Amanda Chadderton
Oldham Council Portfolio Holder

Q: What’s really different about this Partnership?
The first difference is that this is the first time in over five years that Oldham has seen so many different educational and learning groups brought together and that is very positive. For the local authority the educational landscape has changed and the power that the Council once had is diminishing on a weekly basis. There is an acceptance by the local authority that we cannot do this on our own. The next big difference is that this is the most outward looking, educationally speaking, that Oldham Council has ever been. We are an aspirational borough and want to attract new people to come and live and work in Oldham but to do that the education system – it could be measurable, better qualifications, better health (e.g. teeth), or about making better citizens but for me it is especially about giving young people aspirations to go out and achieve the best they can. Partnership is the best way to do this. It is very easy to pull up the drawbridge and go into isolationism because of all the challenges we are facing. But that does not give us strength and is summed up by the young man who opened the conference when he said that as a team we could do better and get more out of it. So the Partnership is for us to create and make it a success.

Lisa Needham - Chair of Primary Heads

Q: What’s the next step?
We can’t be slow on this and we can’t take our time. We have got to have aspirations ourselves, not to work at the speed of the slowest but to work together to achieve what partnership can contribute to better futures for children and young people. What next? We’ve got our objectives and we will work with Business and the Local Authority but as a group of heads we are very powerful together and this is the way forward.

Q: Could you clarify the role of the Private, Voluntary and Faith Sectors, including Children’s Centres in this Partnership?
The development of Early Years Assessment is a good example of the involvement of these sectors and they play a vital role, as do other agencies such as Health. We need a collective view and a joint approach to identifying and responding to children and families in need – it is about meeting particular needs as part of a wider offer. Task Group 1 has been set up and Children’s Centres will be coming to those meetings. There are six Task Groups, one for each objective, and their role is described in the booklet. It is about bringing people together and today is about bringing educationists together with others, not staying in isolation.

Anne Redmond - Special School Head

Q: How do we get everyone to buy in?
We already have partnerships and we cannot wait for everyone to buy in before we move on - we have got to get on with this. As we move forward we will be engaging as many people as we can. The Task Groups are only just starting and we will try to get as many people involved as we can in those Groups and communicate to others. Once we start getting impact, others will see the positive effects of partnership working and be encouraged to join in. May I just refer to the difficulties facing small primary schools as an example – heads are trying to manage the school with high expectations on them with a lot to do. It is natural to think that you should pull up the drawbridge but we have got to help people see that working together and collaborating with each other can help us to find answers together.
We can overcome competitive divisions – not just in the context of schools but more widely as well. There is a good group of us here today. There could be more but it is a good starting point and we need to go out and sell it, arguing the benefits rather than reinforcing any scepticism there might be out there. We have to get on with this and show that we can make a difference.
Closing Remarks

Charlie Parker, Chief Executive – Oldham Council

Thanks to all the contributors – for the challenges as well as the variety of perspectives and presentations. What I want to concentrate on is ambition for Oldham, building on what Jim McMahon said to us. We are all facing challenges. The economic and other challenges we face could make us victims. In Education it must feel as if you are on a constant merry-go-round of policy, curriculum and other changes. It would be very easy for you to retreat back into your institutions. Do we want to be brave and control our own destiny or do we want to have everything done to us? Oldham as a place has a culture of being a victim. The decline in its economic circumstances has been quite dramatic but even in the ‘good times’ Oldham struggled. From 2004 to 2008, Oldham had a net increase in jobs of just 100 – 2,000 private sector jobs were lost and 2,100 public sector jobs created.

This comes about because we have had a history of low ambition, aspirations, skills and attainment. Oldham cannot sustain this. It is beginning to improve but where do we want to be in 10 years time? What is our ambition for Oldham as a place in which to live and work? Do we let processes set the boundaries or do we set objectives to allow ambition to work; not having to wait for the slowest partner or go with the lowest common denominator of action. Do we want to be leaders who are the custodian of our children’s long-term future and have a key role in giving them not just a positive education, which is critical, but also the opportunity and ambition to shape their own destiny? This would contribute not only to their future but to that of our town and borough.

We could all say it is just too difficult, or I work here and I look good. This would be to ignore the sandstorm that is going on around us. The economy is not going to pick up for some time yet. The long-term indebtedness of this country is a huge challenge - in 2015 we will have double the debt of Greece and it will be with us at least to the end of the next decade. To be able to do something for our children requires us to take a radical long-term view, not just deal with short-term issues.

Today has been a really important starting point but it should be much more than that – we have to work out what our ambition should be for the labour market and communities of Oldham and the role that today’s young people will play. How much will they be able to shape it and will they have pride in it? Unless we can get that ambition right we will just manage decline. As Amanda Chadderton said: this is not about creating a new LEA or shuffling deckchairs. It is about creating an ambition for Oldham with young people at the centre. If we can do that together we will always be stronger than if we try and do it individually. If we were really good at local action such as the peer review that we have heard about today and the transfer of learning between schools and between sectors across the age range, we could see off Ofsted. We could do what is needed in an environment that is supporting an ambition for our place. We have to take this opportunity to do something with ourselves and for ourselves. We are the leaders and the custodians of the future. Let’s make it happen.