

Assessing the effectiveness of the Oldham Economic Review as an instrument for impactful academic-policy engagement

A REVIEW PAPER FOR CAPE (CAPABILITIES IN ACADEMIC-POLICY ENGAGEMENT) MANCHESTER TEAM

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Capabilities in Academic
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Executive summary

This paper for Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) assesses whether the Oldham Economic Review was an effective instrument for improving the quality and agility of academic input into public policy.

It draws upon interviews, written materials and attendance by the author at Review sessions.

The trigger for the Review was the desire by the then leader of Oldham Council in 2021 to review and refresh the Council's approach to local economic policy.

She asked the Principal of Oldham College to oversee an independent review charged with making the case for policy change. He, in turn, invited a leading academic and senior manager at The University of Manchester, who also led the local CAPE team, to help design the Review.

These two individuals planned a Review process based on a series of Select Committee-style hearings. They selected a board to oversee the Review comprising local public, private and voluntary sector leaders and representatives from organisations operating at Greater Manchester level.

Topics for the Review sessions and the witnesses chosen to present on them were based on the perceived need to discuss:

- (a) the way economic and related issues facing Oldham were understood locally,
- (b) external, academic and other expertise on the broader context into which Oldham fitted, and
- (c) how Oldham might benefit from likely changes in Government policy that were set to be triggered by the White Paper on Levelling Up.

The Review was delivered quickly but it proved impossible to have the final report formally received by Oldham Council before the local elections, in which the Council leader lost her seat, in May 2022.

The Select Committee-style hearings adopted for the Review proved popular and successful, not least because the quality of evidence the Review leaders were able to procure was considered exceptionally high.

The balance of local and external representatives on the Review board and amongst people who presented evidence was felt to have helped put the challenges Oldham faced into a broader perspective and to have encouraged a clearer appreciation of how Oldham related to its neighbours in an economic and institutional sense.

The fast pace at which the Review was driven helped build momentum and trust between participants.

Limited misgivings about the effectiveness of the Review largely reflect resource constraints on its range and depth but the limited discussion of the toxic nature of Oldham politics and difficult challenges related to social cohesion seemed to result from an implicit agreement not to rock the boat on issues that are not easily resolved by medium term economic strategies.

The CAPE-supported efforts of a small University of Manchester team and its ability to corral wider academic and evidence-informed inputs to the Review were universally lauded.

The final Review report was received positively. It was seen to have struck a productive balance between local concerns and broader Greater Manchester and national institutional perspectives. It provided Government with the first worked example of a locally driven approach to levelling up which also addressed the key issue of the relationship between cities and towns.

Interviewees were sympathetic to the challenges faced by Oldham Council as a result of significant political and executive upheaval during the period immediately after the Review reported. Concern was expressed, however, at the pace at which the Council has developed a comprehensive action plan on the basis of the 'steers' provided by the Review.

This contrasts with the Review-related actions that other stakeholders have moved ahead with since the Review reported.

Interviewees were enthusiastic about the prospect of a Review-style model being adopted in other places and circumstances in Greater Manchester, so long as they are founded on strong local leadership and commitment to change.

Committed leadership and CAPE resources were also crucial to The University of Manchester's contribution to the Review but it is well placed to make a substantial input to similar future initiatives if it can:

- (a) incentivise 'civic' leadership activity more powerfully,
- (b) mobilise institutional research strengths more quickly behind regional policy requirements, and
- (c) consider constructing closer research partnerships with the analytical teams in city-regional partner institutions.

1. Purpose and structure

This paper was commissioned by The University of Manchester arm of CAPE as a local complement to the independent national evaluation of the programme's overall activities. CAPE's mission is to design, test and evaluate interventions to improve the quality and agility of academic input into public policy. The focus here is upon one such intervention, the Oldham Economic Review, which The University of Manchester team drawing on CAPE resources was instrumental in organising and delivering.

The analysis presented here focuses mainly on what The University of Manchester, and higher education interests more broadly, can learn from this initiative. Because academic-policy engagement is a two-way process, it also touches on how the policy world benefited from the Review and the contribution academics and academic knowledge made. The paper draws upon a series of semi-structured interviews with fourteen people involved in the planning and delivery of the Review [listed in Appendix A], an assessment of written materials considered by the Review board and the author's attendance as an observer at some of the Review sessions. It also benefits from the author's broad experience of policy-making in Greater Manchester as a practitioner and academic commentator.

The paper is organised into four further sections. The next section considers the lead-up to the Review, the context in which it developed, the reasons it was seen to be needed, and why it took the form it did. A third section reflects upon the Review process itself, considering which aspects of its design were perceived to have worked well and less well and how the contributions of The University of Manchester, and academia more generally, were valued by Review participants and observers.

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A fourth section then assesses the results of the Review, beginning with how its final report was assembled and received before going on to consider the way it has been followed up, its impact on the activities of stakeholders who took part in it, and the extent to which it is perceived as a good model for future initiatives in academic-policy engagement. A short conclusion follows.

2. Why an Oldham Economic Review?

Context

The immediate trigger for the Review was a decision by the new leader of Oldham Council in 2021 to require a refresh of the Council's approach to local economic policy and to entrust the leadership of a process designed to generate recommendations for change to the Principal of Oldham College. This unusual move, to outsource responsibility for making the case for a shift in policy, represented a strong political desire for change and an openness to external scrutiny. In a media interview at the time of the launch, the leader is reported to have said 'I'm not worried about it being critical about what we're doing now. I'm not bothered about that at all. I want people to be really, really honest and bold in their approach.'

Interviewees had slightly different interpretations of where the case for a fresh independent look at local economic policy had come from. For some, the Council appeared to have become overly invested in an approach to community wealth building which was considered, at best, to be only a partial solution to the economic challenges Oldham faced. This approach focused on trying to ensure the area's modest existing income and wealth was recycled more effectively for the better benefit of Oldham's poorest communities. It was seen as unnecessarily narrow by those who believed the area had more to gain by attracting new investment, firms and households and those who saw sustained local economic gains as being more likely to come from equipping residents with the confidence and skills to access good quality employment, irrespective of where they might work.

The latter, of course, is a core concern of further education colleges so it is unsurprising that Oldham College's Principal should appear as a potential source of ideas for a broader approach.

An alternative interpretation was that, over a longer period, there had been no consistency in the Council's approach. On this view, the ostensible commitment to community wealth building was the latest in a succession of approaches to have found favour with Council officers and members but without engaging the level of external support that would enable greater economic impact to be made in an area that, as one interviewee put it, 'is at the wrong end of all manner of performance indicators.' The key point underlying this observation was that the lack of continuity and consistency in the Council's approach reflected the absence of serious long-term engagement with stakeholders whose support is essential to the effective delivery of a broadly based local economic strategy.

"I'm not worried about it being critical about what we're doing now. I'm not bothered about that at all. I want people to be really, really honest and bold in their approach."

Design and leadership of the Review

The Oldham Economic Review was seen as a way of drawing a wider range of interested parties into debate about the borough's economic future. Whilst the Council leader was given reassurance that the balance of participants involved in the Review coincided with her ambitions for it, the Chair (the College Principal) was given complete freedom to determine its form and content within the resources that could be found to support it. The University of Manchester became involved in the design process at an early stage, largely because of a longstanding personal connection between the Chair and the University's CAPE lead. The latter's academic interests, in further education and the impact of labour market changes on 'left behind' places in the UK and beyond, were closely allied to the agenda for the Review. His then position as Vice Dean for Social Responsibility in the University's largest Faculty also afforded him a platform to engage in institutional outreach activities.

The Oldham Economic Review was seen as a way of drawing a wider range of interested parties into debate about the borough's economic future.

Further factors encouraging University of Manchester involvement included:

Its leading role in putting together the first Greater Manchester Civic Universities Agreement (2021) in which all five of the city-region's higher education institutions plus Greater Manchester's Mayor committed themselves to working together 'to become a tangible force for change in all ten boroughs, and a place where our residents can engage with their universities'. The agreement included a commitment to work more closely with Greater Manchester's further education colleges,

Its ongoing work with two neighbouring Councils in northern Greater Manchester (Rochdale and Bury) on developing an advanced manufacturing innovation park as part of the Atom Valley initiative developed within Greater Manchester's draft statutory land-use plan, and,

The fact that Oldham lacked any higher education presence and was the borough whose residents emerged from research conducted for the civic universities initiative as having least pride in the roles played by universities in Greater Manchester.

Taken together, these factors made The University of Manchester a natural ally to Oldham College in leading the Review. CAPE resources were nonetheless critical in clinching the University's involvement, in demonstrating its commitment and in providing staff members who participated in the Review with permission to engage. CAPE moneys were used, alongside *pro bono* contributions from Oldham College, Oldham Council and the University itself, to support the research and administrative needs of the Review.

The Chair and the CAPE lead assumed primary responsibility for designing the Review process. An early decision was made to run it as a series of Select Committee-style hearings, thereby benefiting from the CAPE lead's long experience in Westminster as a Special Adviser supporting this form of inquiry. The Select Committee format was seen as a good way of exposing Review participants to a variety of perspectives whilst at the same time offering them the opportunity to challenge the evidence offered by witnesses and to debate any implications they saw as arising for local economic policy priorities amongst themselves.

Membership of a specially constituted Review board was largely determined by the Chair who strove for a balance between representatives of broad sectors of local economic activity, important local anchor institutions and key organisations operating at the broader Greater Manchester level. Of the ten further members who joined the Chair and the CAPE lead on the board, three, including the Vice Chair, came from local businesses and business organisations and one each from Oldham Council and local health, housing and voluntary sector organisations. Greater Manchester representation was drawn from senior management in the Combined Authority and the Chamber of Commerce. The remaining place was taken by a second University Professor whose recently created position as a Policy Vice President for Regional Innovation and Civic Engagement carried with it an expectation that he would represent the University on key Greater Manchester development initiatives.

Content of the Review

The topics for the Review sessions and the selection of witnesses were largely determined by the Chair and the CAPE lead. Their choices here reflected three interlinked purposes they determined the Review should serve. The first was to trigger discussion of the specific economic and related issues Oldham faced as they were understood locally. Provision was therefore made for inputs by:

- Council representatives and the police force on trends, challenges and policy responses relating to the economy, housing, health and crime,
- A local entrepreneur on a particularly notable business success story, and
- Officers from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on the actual and potential fit between its projects and priorities and Oldham's particular needs and challenges.

The second main purpose was to take advantage of external expertise and perspectives that were potentially useful to a broader debate about local economic policy. Hence there were sessions in which academics and other experts offered insights, often based on experiences elsewhere on, for example, patterns of post-industrial recovery, the repurposing of high streets, the reuse of historic assets and the remodelling of further education provision.

The third and most pragmatic purpose was to understand how Oldham might benefit from impending changes in national government policy, particularly with respect to ‘levelling up’. Here, the Chair and CAPE lead used the considerable leverage that came from their respective national profiles to invite representatives from key think tanks and consultancies that were then vying for influence over the direction levelling up policy would take to give their perspectives on the potential opportunities arising for places like Oldham.

Scheduling and conducting the Review

Positioning the Review so that Oldham might take advantage of developments in national policy was one of the key determinants of the tight timescales adopted for it. Even when the Review was in its planning stage, a Government White Paper on Levelling Up was rumoured to be imminent, hence there was pressure to make sure the Review’s recommendations picked up on key themes from the White Paper quickly and effectively, whenever it appeared.

The other time pressure related to local electoral factors. With a third of Council seats – including the leader’s – up for election in May 2022, and the traditional pre-election period in which little new Council business gets done due to start in late March, there was an incentive to have the Review completed and received by the Council’s leadership in advance of the run-up to the election. The fact that the leader was rumoured to be at risk of electoral defeat only served to sharpen this incentive.

What emerged from this diverse set of influences was a Review process that began in September 2021 with the first of five, day-long, pre-Christmas sessions in which expert witnesses presented the evidence on the key topics it was agreed they would cover before taking questions from Review board members. Time was set aside at each session for a facilitated discussion of potential emerging implications and each of the board members was encouraged to record and share their thoughts in between meetings. The board was brought together once more in early March to discuss a final draft report which took account of the Levelling Up White Paper, finally published in early February.

The final Review report was launched on 23 March, 2022. In a press release the following day, the Council leader welcomed the report, saying ‘the next step will be to study the findings and recommendations closely, and then take quick and decisive action to fulfil those ambitions’. However, there was insufficient time to formally submit the report to a meeting of the Council for approval before the pre-election period began and in the May elections the Council leader lost her seat.

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3. Impressions of the Review

What went well?

There was near unanimity amongst interviewees that the format adopted for the Review and the interaction it encouraged between its contrasting participants worked exceptionally well and that much of the credit for its success in these respects should go to the Chair and the CAPE lead. The high level of trust placed in the Chair and the respect accorded him for his commitment to Oldham during his time at the College was argued, particularly by board members, to have engendered a positive and purposeful tone to Review proceedings and made the experience of taking part a rewarding, if demanding, one. Most interviewees felt that the board, whilst it often engaged in robust debate, had gelled effectively and taken its collective responsibility for arriving at a broad consensus between the many viewpoints represented around the table seriously.

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The quality of the evidence presented at Review sessions was generally felt to be high and, in the words of one board member, to be ‘off the scale’ compared to what could be expected from a district council. This is a further reflection of the convening power wielded by the Chair and the CAPE lead amongst experts in their fields but interviewees also valued the efforts of ‘back office’ staff within the CAPE team and the Council in providing helpful briefing materials. University involvement was considered to have brought a seriousness and a sense of impartiality and objectivity to Review proceedings which could not easily have come from another source.

This, along with skill in managing debate and a preparedness to explain aspects of presentations or discussions that were unclear to board members, was felt to have helped considerably in making sense of what could be unclear or contradictory evidence.

That interviewees held markedly different views about which Review sessions stood out for them suggests the breadth of topics was well chosen. Whilst most board members, in particular, felt they learned a lot from the sessions, the only pattern that could be discerned from their responses was that local members tended to feel they gained most from the different ways of thinking about issues they gleaned from external experts whereas non-local members valued the detailed insights they got into the nature of Oldham most of all.

The value of putting local perspectives and evidence alongside ‘the bigger picture’ was especially evident in local board member comments to the effect that they didn’t feel Oldham was as unusual (and alone) as they had originally thought by the end of the Review. Many also reported that they had come to appreciate much more clearly how Oldham related to its neighbours and fitted into the larger Greater Manchester picture in both an economic and an institutional sense. This had been another priority for the Review given the recent history of distant relationships between Oldham Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Somewhat paradoxically, the constrained timescale for the Review and the pace it needed to operate at is seen to have had significant benefits. Whilst there was a feeling amongst a minority of board members that some sessions felt rushed or left too little space to explore issues in sufficient depth, this was counterbalanced by the strong sense of momentum that intense activity in a relatively short period of time engendered amongst participants. (‘I was exhausted!’, said one of the Review’s most enthusiastic advocates). Overall, there was a feeling that whilst cases can always be made about the need for more resources and/or to cover more ground, the marginal gains that might have been achieved by expanding or extending the Review would have been small.

What went less well?

The praise interviewees had for the generally high quality of evidence and debate at Review sessions arguably made the partial exceptions stand out. Whilst it was again the case that there was no unanimity amongst interviewees about which sessions worked least well, several participants felt those that considered the local and city-regional strategies, programmes and projects presented by Oldham Council and Combined Authority officers were the least productive. This is perhaps unsurprising given the ambition of the Review to *change* current practice and not simply to *understand* it. It was nonetheless the case that, as is common at Select Committees when civil servants and Ministers defend the Government’s positions, the sessions that dealt with the status quo were the most adversarial and generated the most defensive exchanges.

It also became apparent that the pace of the review and the demands it placed on participants did not suit everyone. There was some fall-off in attendance and interest by a minority of participants, with representatives from the public and voluntary sectors able to stay the course better than their fellow board members. The Oldham Economic Review is certainly not the first initiative by the public sector that has struggled to maintain the level of private sector engagement originally hoped for but it does link to a second perceived limitation of the Review identified by a minority of interviewees – that it was unable to find a compelling way of engaging with and appreciating the issues faced by Oldham’s ‘ordinary’ businesses. The case for learning and hearing more from individual businesses was debated in Review sessions but aspirations to do more on this front could not be realised with the resources and time available.

A third shortcoming perceived by one board member in particular (and acknowledged in interview by the Chair) was the paucity of discussion about the value of closer collaboration between Oldham anchor institutions that depend upon or owe their existence to public funding, particularly with respect to the role of housing in neighbourhood place-making. A fourth, articulated by several interviewees, was a tendency, during Review deliberations, to conflate the borough of Oldham with the old town of Oldham, one inadvertent effect of which was to focus much attention – unwarranted, for some – on Oldham’s town centre.

Whilst it was accepted that dwelling on micro-differences between places would have been counterproductive, this was seen to matter, particularly to understandings of civic pride, in the sense that there are significant parts of the borough of Oldham with their own distinct make-up and identities in which residents feel themselves to have little in common with those in the historic town of Oldham and no interest or interaction with its town centre.

Each of these reservations are largely a function of constraints on the range and depth of the Review and can potentially be addressed in the process of following up on its recommendations. The same cannot easily be said, however, of two other inter-related features of Oldham life that some interviewees felt were given too little airtime during the Review. The first, identified by non-local board members, concerned the toxic nature of aspects of Oldham politics, where it was felt that more contextual knowledge could have improved outsiders’ understandings of the difficulties faced in particular by Oldham Council. The second, felt to have been understated, if understandably, by a minority of local board members, was the closely related issue of challenges to social cohesion. The reason for the low level of discussion in both cases seems to have been that there was an implicit agreement, especially amongst experienced Oldham ‘insiders’, that little could be gained in terms of achieving the Review’s core ambitions from rehearsing endemic challenges that undeniably have an economic dimension to them but are only likely to moderate over the longer term.

University knowledge in the Review process

The overwhelmingly positive impressions that interviewees had of the Review as a whole, and of the contribution made by The University of Manchester in particular, reflect extremely well on the small group of university staff whose efforts were underpinned by CAPE resources. Improving the knowledge of board members by exposing them to different, evidence-informed views was a central mission of the Review and knowledge drawn from academic sources played a significant supporting role in realising that aspiration. Whilst members of the group inevitably drew upon their own academic research during the Review, though, their contributions went well beyond scholarly expertise. They drew, for example, upon:

- The convening power that a strong external reputation amongst policy makers and policy advocates, as well as academics, brings

- Highly developed skills in organising and facilitating evidence-based exchanges in an inclusive but nonetheless purposeful way, and

- Individual commitments to achieving outcomes that would have practical value, thereby demonstrating the value of the University's commitment to civic engagement.

That the Review did not labour the importance of the sorts of academic research outputs that are valued highly within the world of higher education was partly deliberate. Care was taken not to oversell external 'solutions' when what was seen to be needed most was stakeholder buy-in to an approach developed locally. At the same time, the pace at which the Review had to move meant there was no real prospect of organising any new, dedicated research given the long lag times that are generally associated with the definition and delivery of academic studies, particularly when they draw upon any of the standard university research funding sources.

That a University team could emerge with credit for its essential contribution to an effort to improve local policy-making without having much time or opportunity to draw upon dedicated research was not something interviewees paid much attention to. It does, however, speak to the challenges universities face in assessing their impact on the world of policy-making and how best to go about measuring and encouraging it. We return to this dilemma in the next section.

The pace at which the Review had to move meant there was no real prospect of organising any new, dedicated research.

4. Results of the Review

Production and receipt of the Review report

There was consensus amongst board members that the final report of the Review was a faithful reflection of the evidence they had heard and the discussions it had triggered. There was some feeling that, with more work, the final product could have been crisper and pointed the way more clearly to follow-up action. It was generally felt, though, that the Review had delivered on its central aspirations and that the wider group of stakeholders it had involved had been given ample opportunity to influence the outcome, within the time and resource constraints they operated under, even to the extent of drafting parts of it in some cases. A report featuring more detailed prescriptions, it was argued, would have gone against the spirit of the enterprise which always saw the product of the Review as being a route map for the Council to review and take forward rather than a detailed action plan.

At the same time, the report unsurprisingly corresponded closely to the interests and views of those who designed and led the Review process and wrote the lion's share of it; the Chair and the CAPE lead. The Chair was unapologetic about this in interview, readily concurring with the view put forward by Council officials that the Review was not so much an impartial look at the evidence as a 'differently partial' interpretation of what the relevant evidence is and means. This, he rightly pointed out, is wholly consistent with the task he was asked to do and the terms on which he agreed to do it.

Levelling Up Oldham: The Oldham Economic Review of Economic Transformation and Civic Pride deliberately adopted a similar structure to that used by Government in its Levelling Up White Paper. It advanced the core argument that Oldham needs to rediscover an economic purpose for itself, and that this is fundamentally dependent on higher levels of business success, but that 'outer towns [like Oldham] are unlikely to thrive independently unless they position themselves to maximise the benefits of being situated in a larger economic entity' – in Oldham's case, within Greater Manchester. The Review also placed Oldham's economic challenges into the broader political and inter-governmental context. It was the first worked example that took the principles outlined in the Government's Levelling Up White Paper, including the key aspiration to link the economic fortunes of towns and cities together more effectively, and applied them in a concrete, real world setting.

The recommendations of the Review built upon this broad understanding of what an economic policy for Oldham needed to do and related it to the themes laid out in the Levelling Up White Paper.

There was consensus amongst board members that the final report of the Review was a faithful reflection of the evidence they had heard and the discussions it had triggered

Out of this came specific suggestions about the need to develop a sustained view of the 'long game' based upon: supporting wealth-creating business, particularly in manufacturing, more effectively; engaging with regional innovation initiatives and extending them into Oldham; encouraging the borough's key 'anchor institutions' to use their economic influence to greater local advantage; reforming further education to create alternative, non-degree routes into good work for learners of all ages; exploring ways of building civic pride by capitalising on the economic legacy of town centres, former industrial areas and neighbourhoods, and; developing stable inter-institutional partnerships capable of delivering over the long term.

Following up on the Review

There are two broad ways of assessing the emerging impacts of the final report, and of the Review process more generally, that fall out of the twin aspirations for the process. One, recognising who commissioned it and the important role the Council has in responding to its recommendations, is to focus on follow-up activity by Oldham Council. The other, recognising the importance of independent stakeholder commitment to the realisation of economic policy goals, is to examine the difference the Review made to other participants and to relations between them. There is progress to report on both fronts although it is fair to say that, certainly at the time interviews for this paper took place, more confidence was being expressed in the latter than in the former.

As noted above, whilst the Review report has been in the public domain since last March, it could not formally be received by the Council until after the May elections. At that time the Council was in executive as well as political flux, as the impact of a new Chief Executive who had joined during the Review process fed through into changes in senior management. The hiatus that inevitably followed ended when the new Council leader reaffirmed her predecessor's support for the Review and its conclusions. A paper to the Council's Cabinet on 25 July subsequently committed the Council to:

Note the findings of the Commission and endorse the recommendations set out in the review and accept and approve them, and

Confirm that the recommendations will feed into the work programme / agenda for the refreshed Oldham Partnership to continue with wider partnerships for the accountability of deploying relevant actions and delivering solutions to improve the lives of Oldham's residents.

Since then, there have been ongoing efforts to reshape the Oldham Partnership and to create a sub-group tasked with prioritising and operationalising the Review recommendations. An independently facilitated workshop attended by representatives of the Council and other stakeholders on 7 November last year was designed to take this work a step further by helping identify 'clear actions and owners' and 'barriers and information gaps' that, once overcome, could result in 'delivery-focused partnership action'. At the time of writing, though, there have been no further outward signs of an overarching implementation plan emerging from the Council to deliver on these aspirations.

This is not to suggest that no substantive activity has been incentivised by the Review, directly or indirectly. Various actions have been taken, individually or jointly, by Review partners which either begin to deliver on some of the Review recommendations or were inspired in other respects by being part of the review process. Examples of the former include:

Much more regular meetings between the senior management teams of Oldham Council and the Combined Authority and more interaction between Council officers and economic programme deliverers in the broader Greater Manchester family of organisations,

The inclusion, by the Combined Authority, of an area of Oldham within its Atom Valley innovation zone in order to ensure that there is direct Oldham benefit from this initiative,

More impetus to joint work between further education colleges, the Combined Authority and the university on Mayoral aspirations to make Greater Manchester a 'technical education city-region',

Stronger collaboration between Oldham College and health employers on targeted recruitment from Oldham communities currently under-represented in areas of the NHS workforce, and

Significant 'read across' between the recommendations of the Review report on the role of further education in adapting Oldham to changing local and city-regional economic circumstances and the refreshed Oldham College strategy.

Other initiatives have come about because of the higher profile Oldham achieved through the Review or as a result of participants learning lessons from the way it was conducted.

Examples here include:

Direct contact between Oldham firms and University leads on innovation projects,

Greater contact between Oldham Council and national civil servants, for example on social cohesion challenges and 'single place conversations'

Much greater interest in voluntary activity in Oldham by think tanks and academics, resulting in, for example, participation by one of the Review partners in new research on the importance of civic pride to economic change and another taking up a scholarship to do a PhD with a local university, and

Participants learning from the Review process how to use data and intelligence more effectively within their organisational planning cycles.

The Review as a demonstration model

Most interviewees felt that the model developed for the Review could be deployed in other places and in a range of circumstances. Within the Greater Manchester context, there was a tendency to see potential for something similar in 'places like Oldham', by which was meant more peripheral areas of the city-region that have experienced de-industrialisation and benefited less than Greater Manchester's regional centre from the shift to services and knowledge-rich economic activities. This led naturally to the thought that, for example, Wigan, Bolton or Tameside might benefit from the sort of process designed for Oldham.

As a smaller number of interviewees pointed out, though, if one of the core ambitions of such reviews is to re-examine the way neighbouring areas of Greater Manchester relate to one another, there is a case for looking at more ‘successful’ areas, too. On one hand, it is useful to think through how all ‘parts’ of Greater Manchester might contribute better to the success of the ‘whole’. On the other, as policy makers in Manchester, Salford, Stockport and Trafford readily understand, there are challenges in every borough relating to the extent to which different local communities benefit from patterns of economic change, even when jobs-rich areas are ostensibly ‘on the doorstep’.

Whilst there is clearly potential for extending the Oldham model to other places, it is as well to remember that there were some exceptional circumstances in Oldham that make simple replication less than straightforward. Not every area will have a Council leader willing to anoint a trusted ‘outsider’ with responsibility for leading a major policy review and be similarly open to the idea that an independently driven process can produce better results than a more closed, internal review would. This points to the need for any similar reviews in future to be driven locally, and potentially to be smaller in scope, if they are to ‘work’. Whereas Oldham College, The University of Manchester and the Combined Authority played critical roles in the Oldham review, it would have been inappropriate for them to take the lead in advocating it.

There are some special circumstances involved in The University of Manchester contribution to the Review, too, which mean it is far from certain that a similar level of commitment might arise spontaneously in support of similar local development initiatives in future. The creation of an internal resource similar to that provided by CAPE would be the most obvious way of providing some incentive for future activity. If University staff are to play similarly well-received and high-profile roles in similar initiatives in the future, there is also a case for considering:

- How Greater Manchester universities’ commitments to ‘civic’ activity can be incentivised in such a way that Faculty members who are minded to support such initiatives feel it is worth their while to trade activity in this field off against more traditional academic performance indicators,
- How institutional research strengths can be mobilised more effectively behind initiatives that demand rapid responses and reviews of research fields rather than specific new research, and
- Whether one way into establishing a higher profile in policy-relevant research is to build more robust partnerships with the analytic teams within policy-making institutions.

Conclusion

The Oldham Economic Review represented a calculated gamble for the leadership of Oldham Council and the principal figures in Oldham College and The University of Manchester who agreed to drive it. The gamble paid off handsomely in delivering against the Review's terms of reference and providing a route map for a more expansive and better-supported local economic strategy for Oldham. It also spawned a variety of activities to improve the economic prospects of the area and its people that would not have happened, or at least would have evolved more slowly, but for the Review.

It is still too early to anticipate, far less measure, the full impact the Review might have but the evidence so far suggests that similar initiatives, drawing on productive academic-policy engagement and using the Oldham Economic Review as an inspiration rather than a precise template, could have similarly positive outcomes. Experience in delivering the Review gives some important clues as to how further, related initiatives might be supported by universities and other key stakeholders in future. For all these reasons, the Oldham Economic Review can act as a useful reference point for CAPE and as an informative case study for the next generation of academic-policy collaborations it seeks to enable.



Appendix A:

List of interviewees (in the order in which they were consulted, Nov-Dec 2022)

John Wrathmell	Director, Research, Strategy & Economy, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Jay Amin	Consultant
Donna McLaughlin	Director of Social Value, Northern Care Alliance
Professor Andy Westwood	Professor of Government Practice, former Vice-Dean for Social Responsibility in the Faculty of Humanities, The University of Manchester and CAPE team leader
Andrew Lightfoot	Deputy Chief Executive, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Laura Windsor-Welsh	Director, Action Together (Oldham)
Cath Green (Farrell)	Housing consultant, former CEO of First Choice Homes, Oldham
Professor Richard Jones	Chair in Materials Physics and Innovation Policy, Vice-President for Regional Innovation and Civic Engagement, The University of Manchester
Jon Bloor, Paul Clifford, Jonathan Downs and Guy Parker	Oldham Council Economy and Policy Teams
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