

In its heyday Oldham was the world's most productive cotton spinning mill town. Those days are long gone, but new political leadership has brought a change of fortune. Chris Maguire reports

ARE THE GOOD TIMES RETURNING TO OLDHAM?

Jim McMahon is not the sort of person you expect to see in charge of a council. For a start he's only 32, but what makes the leader of Oldham Council different is his disarming honesty. He has no truck with destructive tit-for-tat politics and has just launched a campaign to guarantee every young person leaving school at 18 an employment or training opportunity by 2015.

"The scale of the problem is so big that the response has to be bigger," he says. McMahon has been at the helm of the council since 2010 after becoming the leader of his local Labour party in 2008.

His goals are the same as the local authority's dynamic chief executive Charlie Parker, who joined in 2008, and the transformation in Oldham's fortunes has been startling.

In 2009 Oldham had the worst customer satisfaction in the country; in 2012, the council was named the most improved council in the country in 2012. Getting to grips with its finances was one of Parker's priorities and by 2015 the local authority will have made savings of £140m and removed 800 jobs.

The eye-catching bit is Oldham's approach to business, which is leading to comparisons between McMahon and Parker, and Manchester City Council's leaders Sir Richard Leese and Sir Howard Bernstein.

The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) project has transformed the borough's education infrastructure, and the long-awaited arrival of Metrolink will open up Oldham to Greater Manchester and beyond.

Big regeneration schemes in the pipeline include bringing a new cinema and restaurant to the Old Town Hall and the Hotel Future project, but McMahon says the priority is job creation.

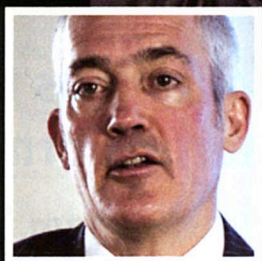
"Oldham used to produce more cotton than the whole of Europe combined," he says. "We were the best in the world. Oldham went from a town of 14,000 people to 250,000 in the Industrial Revolution. We're not that place anymore. People are unsure of their future, so we're trying to give them a sense of confidence. There's no reason the next world-changing invention can't come from Oldham."

McMahon is working hard to promote Oldham beyond its own boundaries and recently held an Invest in Oldham event in London.

He hopes the decision of pumps manufacturer NOV Mono to transfer its headquarters and 400 staff to Oldham will act as the catalyst for others to follow suit.

He makes no attempt to airbrush the race riots out of Oldham's history but says there's a better solution than just throwing money at the issue. McMahon says: "For a long time politics got in the way of progress in Oldham. In the ten years since the riots, Oldham has received £250m of area-based and other government grants that were meant to tackle the issues that contributed to the riots."

"There's not a cat in hell's chance I'm going to allow my sons to stay in a town where there's no hope. We need people to roll up their sleeves."



COMMON GOAL Charlie Parker (inset) and Jim McMahon

"My starting point is that we need to create confidence so that people want to be part of Oldham rather than talking about race. We need to improve the social circumstances of people; that starts with having a job. My dad was a truck driver who worked long hours but instilled in us that if a job was out there we shouldn't be sitting at home.

"It's all about jobs. A lot of crime and issues to do with housing and poverty are linked to not having a job. Some people just need more help. There's no reason why people should say 'there's no job for me'."

Oldham Council is resolutely under Labour's control, but its leader has been careful not to lambaste the coalition government in public. "I've got a view about the government, and when I need to disagree I will," he says, "but what I don't do is prostitute the town to make a political point. Far too many council leaders will do that and it has a negative impact on the town."

Oldham Council's flagship scheme is 'Get Oldham Working' – a plan to create 2,015 jobs by 2015. The council has pledged to guarantee every young person leaving school at 18 an employment or training opportunity by 2015 and has already received a £1m donation from local businessman Norman Stoller.

That money, from the Stoller Charitable Trust, will be channelled into another component of the campaign, an Enterprise Trust, which is designed to find the next generation of entrepreneurs by helping start-ups get off the ground.

"My ambition for Get Oldham Working is to have a cast-iron guarantee for our young people," says McMahon, who is also lead member for Skills and Employment on the Greater Manchester

lost that spirit of enterprise. We want to say to every young person – if you're willing to roll your sleeves up and get on in life you have the full support of your town behind you."

Businesses are being asked to sign pledge cards to create jobs, support local suppliers, and offer mentoring and support, work experience, apprenticeships, training and development, job shadowing and volunteer opportunities.

Stoller's late father Ivor invented the world famous tubular bandage and started Seton Healthcare in the 1950s with £100 of borrowed capital; the company became one of Oldham's biggest employers. He said: "One thing that I've learnt is that it isn't brilliant inventions that make money, nor impressive plans, buildings or machinery. It is the need for clever people with engineering and other skills, who are loyal, hardworking and willing to accept challenge

and innovation. Oldham is famous for all this and much more."

McMahon says: "There's not a cat in hell's chance that I'm going to allow my two sons to stay in a town where there's no hope. I care about other children in the same way. If you're an armchair moaner you're part of the problem. We need people to roll up their sleeves."

'GET OLDHAM WORKING' IS THE COUNCIL'S PLAN TO CREATE 2,015 JOBS BY 2015



Oldham Town Hall

Combined Authority. "By 2015 we will have in place the Oldham Youth Guarantee. No person will leave school without the guarantee of a job, education, apprenticeship, volunteering opportunity or support towards self-employment.

"We want to say Oldham is a town that believes in you. We want to say Oldham is a town that once led the world and hasn't

insider
ECONOMIC FORUM
OLDHAM

MAKING A BUSINESS CASE FOR OLDHAM

Newcomers can expect affordable offices and a wide pool of talent to pick from, said panellists at our economic forum

More than 100 delegates attended *Insider's* economic forum, held at Madeleine Lindley Training & Conference Centre, to hear from a succession of the town's business leaders. They also heard from Oldham Council's chief executive Charlie Parker and Oldham College's principal Alun Francis, who spoke about inspiring the town's next generation of business leaders. Oldham College, Oldham Council, Unity Partnership and Willmott Dixon sponsored the event.

BUSINESS LEADER

Mike Braddock, chief executive of P&R Fire Security, is on the board of the Oldham



Business Leadership Group (OBLG). This private-led group has the support of the public sector with the aim being to

improve Oldham. He said: "I've been running businesses in and around Oldham for more than 20 years. Oldham isn't just open for business, it's actively opening its arms for business. I don't know if it's because of the change in the political leadership but there's a new-found enthusiasm in Oldham. The people involved in OBLG run businesses and are looking to support the economic environment around Oldham."

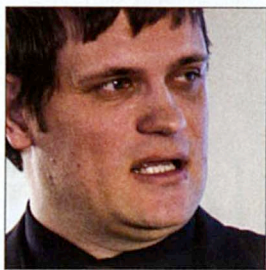
When Remploy closed its base in the borough, Braddock set up the social

enterprise 4D Enterprise and employed 22 of Remploy's former workers to manufacture windows and doors.

TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

Web Applications UK employs 90 people at its base in Oldham and has an annual turnover of £3m. The company also has operations in Australia and America, and develops different types of software for leading travel companies.

Chief executive Craig Dean said the nature of his business meant he could be based anywhere with good broadband access and transport links but he chose Oldham because it was a "good place to do business". He said that relocating to a new office in Manchester city centre or MediaCity would be too expensive and wouldn't benefit



the business as it trades globally.

"We want to show people that we are a successful business," he said. "We chose Oldham

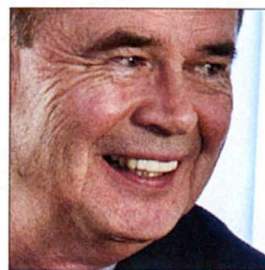
because it's good for us; it has a very young population and good connectivity. There are no technical barriers from being here and it's less expensive to do business."

Dean, who is also the Oldham President within the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and a governor of Oldham College, added: "It's too easy to look at the negatives. A lot of work is being done to convince people that Oldham has a future."

NEW ARRIVAL

NOV Mono manufactures pumps in the engineering sector. It has been based in Tameside since 1932 but has outgrown the current base and is relocating six miles to

Oldham. The company, which employs 400 people at its Manchester headquarters and 1,000 people globally, had been linked to a move to China and the US but opted for Oldham. NOV Mono will be relocating to the former BAE site at Chadderton and expects



to complete the move at the beginning of 2014.

Group managing director Paul Naylor says: "Oldham Council has

been very receptive. It dovetails in with the plan of Jim McMahon and Charlie Parker to create jobs. Their enthusiasm was one of the deciding factors. We've worked with Oldham College in terms of apprenticeships and Oldham ticked all the boxes for us."

NOV Mono exports 80 per cent of its products and Naylor believes more should be made of the Greater Manchester brand around the world.

DEVELOPER

Willmott Dixon employs 170 staff from its base in Oldham and has a turnover of £130m. The company had an office in Leeds but relocated to Oldham, where it has been involved in building three academy schools and is behind two new leisure centres.

Anthony Dillon, managing director of Willmott Dixon

(Northern) said "continuity of projects" was crucial in the construction industry but 80 per cent of the spend from the academy



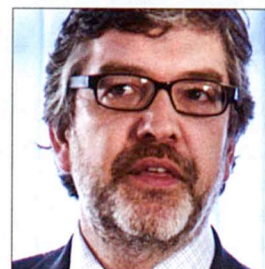
schools went in Oldham. "Oldham is going places," he said. "There are some fantastic developments in the pipeline; the Hotel Future scheme, in particular, will be fantastic."

Manchester Hoteliers' Association is behind the £40m project, which includes a luxury hotel and convention centre and could create thousands of jobs each year. "Word is getting out that there's a bit of a buzz about Oldham," says Dillon. "The council has embraced the public-private partnership and that's paying dividends. Where we can, Willmott Dixon will use local companies. There's got to be a competitive advantage, but we want to benefit the local economy."

EDUCATION

Raising education standards across Oldham has been a priority for years and prompted several academies to be built under the Building Schools for the Future scheme. Oldham College has been at the heart of the process. It's in the top 20 per cent of colleges in the country offering 900 courses.

Because the average family income is lower in Oldham than anywhere else in



Greater Manchester, principal Alun Francis launched Study Money, a scheme that gives children of low-income families £20

per week to study at Oldham College.

Other highlights include expanding into higher education with University Campus Oldham and the imminent arrival of the University Technical College. The college also runs the Peter Jones Enterprise Academy, which gives students on the fast-track one-year course the opportunity to set up and run their own business.



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