

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 24th November 2023

Subject: Greater Manchester Children & Young People Programme Update

Report of: Councillor Hunter, Portfolio Lead for children and young people and
Caroline Simpson, Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for children and young
people.

Purpose of Report

Update GMCA on three important pieces of work as part of the GM Children & Young People's programme including:

- GM Pledge
- Project Skyline
- GM Fostering Programme

Recommendations:

The GMCA is requested to:

1. Note the commitment of all GM Local Authorities to tackling the high costs and reliance on agency social workers by signing up to the 'GM Pledge'.
2. Note progress to date on 'Project Skyline' and the intention to launch the procurement exercise for the proposed children's homes in the final quarter of 2023/24.
3. Note the GM level response to the challenge of how to increase the number of foster carers across the city-region.
4. Continue to lobby Government for fair and sustainable funding for children's services and an acceleration of the regulation and statutory guidance required to tackle the rising costs of placements for Looked After Children and the high cost associated with agency social workers.
5. Identify work areas within the GM Children's programme that are of particular interest for the next thematic update from GM Children's Board to GMCA.

Contact Officers

Jacob Botham, Children & Young People Lead, GMCA
(Jacob.botham@greatermanchester.gov.uk)

1. Introduction/Background

- 1.1. In recent years there has been increasing recognition of the value of Greater Manchester level collaboration around children's services. The GM Children's Board now oversees a broad range of GM level programmes aimed at improving the lives for children & young people, often with a focus on supporting those living in the most challenging circumstances. These programmes involve local authorities, health, police, VSCE partners and often young people themselves working together on a range of activity aimed at improving service delivery in localities, enhancing the knowledge and skills of professionals and implementing innovative practice models.
- 1.2. It is now more important than ever that as a set of partners we come together on a city-regional basis around the needs of GM children & young people. As public services we face significant levels of demand across parts of the children and young people system, for example we are seeing unprecedented demand for speech and language, SEND and mental health services. These are patterns that have undoubtedly been exacerbated through the impact of the Covid pandemic, alongside evidence of an impact on the development levels of our 0-5s and a lasting legacy of poor school attendance levels for some pupils.
- 1.3. In response to these challenges the GM Children's Board continues to advocate for taking a system wide response to these challenges – this means GM public services working together as one to respond to the challenges rather than operating in organisational silos. A good example of this is the development of 'Giving every child and young person the best start in life' element of the GM Integrated Care Partnership Joint Forward Plan, which seeks to align system activity and resources in order to tackle the most pressing issues and respond to the needs of priority groups of children and young people (e.g Looked After Children).
- 1.4. From a financial perspective, Children's Services departments across GM and nationally continue to face significant financial pressures. An exercise with locality finance leads concluded in late 2022 found that GM's local authorities were spending more than £480m on children's social care budgets areas, including around £100m on external residential placements.¹ High-level modelling of the official financial outturn data published by DLUHC suggests that there has been a 31% real-terms increase in

¹ Based on bespoke financial returns from the x10 locality authority Children's Services finance leads, presented to Directors of Children's Services and Treasurers in Autumn 2022. Based on outturn figures for 2021/22. It is intended to revisit this exercise shortly to review the latest trends.

GM authorities' spend on late intervention in the last five years, along with a - 8% real-terms reduction in spending on prevention/early intervention in the same period.²

1.5. In light of these challenges and parallel demand/financial pressures in other parts of the system (including the NHS, for example children and young people mental health services) the GMCA programme team has been working alongside the ten Directors of Children's Services on projects designed to tackle some of the causes of these pressures through GM-level collaboration. At the same time GM NHS is demonstrating its commitment to supporting the needs of some of the most vulnerable young people in GM, for example through dedicating funding and resources to improve the standard health offer for Looked After and Cared For young people (described in the GM Integrated Care Partnership Joint Forward Plan).

1.6. This report provides a summary of progress on a three projects that are all at an important stage in their development that are designed to tackle some of the financial pressures facing GM local authorities (and in the case of Project Skyline also GM NHS pressures) and improve the experience of GM children and families. The projects include:

- **The 'GM pledge'** – agreement between Local Authorities designed to help manage costs and reduce our reliance on agency social workers.
- **Project Skyline** - proposal to create supply of children's homes to increase availability of LAC placements in the GM region for some of most vulnerable young people whilst tackling the significant costs associated with these type of placements.
- **DfE Fostering Pathfinder** – Funding opportunity for GM as a city-region to test reforms around fostering identified through the independent review of children's social care.

2. Implementing the 'GM Pledge'

2.1. Local Authorities children's services departments are facing significant challenges in terms of recruitment and retention of staff. As with many other parts of the country a shortage in the children's social care market has resulted in increasing pay rates for

² Based on an analysis of Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2021 to 2022, applying a high-level analysis to replicate [this](#) national analysis by Pro Bono Economics published in Sep 2023.

agency staff in Greater Manchester contributing to financial pressures on children's services budgets.

- 2.2. There are currently 581 agency children's social work roles being used by GM LAs (at the end of September 2023) which equates to 27.7% of the total workforce. At the end of Q1 2023/24, the annualised total spend on these agency roles was around £43m. The reality is that Agency social workers cost more to a local authority than a permanent social worker - this has a knock-on effect of reducing levels of funding that may otherwise be available for wider services.
- 2.3. Whilst at an operational level it's vital to recognise the important role that agency staff play in supporting GM children and families in addition to the financial challenges for local authorities an over reliance on agency social workers rather than permanent staff potentially means that children and families may experience more unstable social care experience, which can leave them feeling frustrated and unsupported.
- 2.4. In response to these challenges the ten GM Directors of Children's Services and HR Directors have worked together on the development and introduction of the 'GM Pledge', which sets out a series of commitments from the ten GM local authorities to work collectively to support and manage our social care workforce, including tackling the high cost of agency children's social workers (see Appendix for details).
- 2.5. The 'GM Pledge' builds on similar agreements between Local Authorities in London and the East of England but it also reflects some of our own ambitions / challenges. As an example, an important aspect of the work on the Pledge for GM has been to review the current rates of pay and agree a maximum cap rate. This recognises the need to strike the right balance between the market factors whilst addressing the financial challenges facing Local Authorities.
- 2.6. The 'GM Pledge' was approved by the GM Childrens Board meeting in September and went live on 1st November, 2023 following extensive consultation with staff, chief legal officers, legal counsel, GM trade union representatives, Reed (GM Managed Service provider) and other stakeholders.
- 2.7. To monitor compliance with the 'GM Pledge' the GMCA research team have produced a baseline report which sets out information on the number of agency worker roles across GM, the number of assignments that are over the GM Pledge cap and number of managed teams. A bimonthly monitoring report, supplemented by monthly data returns will be provided to DCSs/HRDs during the first 6 months of GM Pledge implementation. This will ensure implementation can be monitored in a timely and effective manner.

- 2.8. Work undertaken as part of the development of the GM Pledge has brought to the fore the wider issues of recruitment and retention challenges in the children's social care workforce. The ten Directors of Children's Services and HR Directors have agreed to hold a joint session in December, 2023 to discuss what else we can do as a GM system to tackle these issues and strengthen our focus on the benefits of being a member of the permanent children's social worker in GM.
- 2.9. Regionally we are working closely with the North-West Association of Directors of Children's Services (NWADCS) and an update on progress is being taken to the next meeting on 21 November. Nationally we are also connected into conversations taking place with the Department for Education and other regions to support thinking around how some of ambitions of the pledge could be supported by introduction of new rules nationally, with statutory guidance expected in autumn 2024.

3. Project Skyline

- 3.1. Just over 12 months ago GMCA research team undertook an extensive piece of financial analysis looking at the cost of placements for Looked After the Children in GM. In many ways the analysis reflected the picture nationally, with LAC placements accounting for significant proportion of overall spend, rising costs for placements and an absence of the sort of placements required to meet the needs of some GM children. This 2022 analysis demonstrated that around 50% of total children's social care expenditure related specifically to GM's looked after children, with outturn exceeding budgeted expenditure in 9/10 localities. A recent review of the costs of independent sector placements has confirmed that these pressures continue: the median weekly cost of a residential externally-commissioned placement is now around £4,800, up 14% on the average twelve month previously.³
- 3.2. Building on one of the central aims of the GM LAC Sufficiency Strategy GMCA working with Local Authorities and NHS colleagues have developed a proposal to create supply of a new set of children's homes that will respond to the need for more provision to accommodate young people with complex mental health issues and those experiencing emotional behavioural difficulties.
- 3.3. The project entitled 'Project Skyline' with leadership provided through the lead Chief Executive with responsibility for Children and Young People and lead GM DCS for

³ Median weekly cost per independent sector placement, placed by GM Local Authorities in the period April 2022-March 2023. Source: 'Placements North West' quarterly submissions by GM commissioners

Looked After Children has developed significantly over the last 12 months and is poised to move into the next phase.

- 3.4. An important development for the project is the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding between all ten Local Authorities and GM NHS. The MoU recognises the commitment of the ten local authorities and GM NHS to the ambitions of the project including the investment case, which would see the homes acquired and owned by GMCA then leased to a third party who will deliver the provision on behalf of the 10 Local authorities. The signing of the MoU represents an important milestone for the project - providing the necessary assurances for the project to be able to progress the procurement phase and secure the allocation of further resources from GMCA.
- 3.5. Another important milestone for the project has been the recent Market Engagement event. Attended by a range of providers of different sizes this event provided an opportunity to soft test the aims of the project, test key aspects of the specification and communicate the tender process with the marketplace. A further market engagement exercise is planned for the next few weeks, after which the detailed procurement timeline and final version of the specification will be produced. It is proposed that the procurement exercise will be launched before the end of the financial year (23/24).
- 3.6. Recognising the importance of having a clear health offer within the children's homes discussions have been taking place with NHS GM colleagues to ensure that the health offer within Skyline is aligned to the strategic objectives of the project. GM Integrated Care Executive Board have agreed to nominate an NHS lead for Skyline who is working alongside the project team to design a clinical offer within the service specification.
- 3.7. In parallel to this work GM have submitted a bid to be one of two pathfinder areas nationally for the Regional Care Cooperatives that building on Project Skyline would see GM accelerate ambitions to re-shape the marketplace for LAC placements with an emphasis on keeping more GM children placed in GM, improving placement stability and working with providers in an attempt to tackle the high-costs associated with placements. The offer to each pathfinder for successful pathfinder areas is £1.5m development costs and an allocation of £5m capital funding. GM expects to hear the outcome of the bid in December.

4. GM Fostering Programme

- 4.1. In response to recommendations within the Independent Review of Children's Social Care DfE announced over the summer an opportunity for regional collaborations of local authorities to submit an expression of interest to be pathfinder areas to test/

implement some of the recommended reforms around fostering. In summary the programme is designed to deliver end-to-end improvements that support boosting foster carer numbers including:

- A recruitment support hub to provide information about fostering for your Local Authority to maximise the number of people who take forward a fostering application.
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the region to support retention of foster carers.
- A marketing campaign to attract new foster carers.

The GM proposal to secure the maximum of £2.7m of funding was successful and GM Local Authorities were notified of the DfE decision in early October. DfE grant funding will support set up and implementation of the recruitment support hub (£1.5m) and implementation / expansion of the Mockingbird model (£1.2m).

4.2. Rochdale have agreed to be the host Local Authority for the regional Fostering Recruitment Support Hub. They will therefore receive the majority of the funding allocation to support the necessary design work and recruitment activity required to have the hub operational by 1st April 2024, An allocation of funding will also be allocated to each GM Local authority to use flexibly to create the link between their existing Fostering Teams and the Hub alongside funding for a pool of Foster Carer 'Ambassadors' that will support LA recruitment activity.

4.3. The Fostering pathfinder opportunity will enable GM to build on the existing Fostering Programme that has already seen us launch the GM 'Fostering Unfiltered' campaign in recent months (A separate allocation of DfE funding for a fostering marketing campaign is expected to be announced in forthcoming months). As part of this campaign all ten Local Authorities and the GM Mayor signed a Fostering Promise as part of the Fostering Unfiltered campaign on the 12th October which marked the beginning of a GM Fostering Fortnight to increase awareness of the campaign, and celebrate and spotlight existing foster carers. The communications activity resulted in over 20,000 video views and over 152,000 post views across social media channels and gives us a springboard for further campaign activity.

4.4. All ten Local Authorities will receive an allocation of funding to support the implementation or expansion of the Mockingbird model (for those GM LAs that already have it). The Mockingbird model involves foster carers being part of a group with other foster carers who are described as satellite foster homes. They are supported by a

central 'hub' home, which provides resources and support to the satellite homes.

Stockport, who have operated the model for several years, will be the lead LA for GM and will provide support and guidance to other LAs alongside the Fostering Network.

4.5. Alongside this programme GM Local Authorities also have an ambition to become the first Fostering Friendly region, a scheme run by the Fostering Network. Discussions are underway with individual Local Authorities to progress this and over the next few months there will also be a focus on working with local and regional businesses around how they can enable and encourage employees to become foster carers.

5. Conclusion and Next Steps

- 5.1. The projects described in this report are a good example of how through collaboration and shared commitments GM Local Authorities are seeking to find city-regional solutions to some of the biggest challenges facing children's services departments and ultimately improve the lives of children & young people in our boroughs. Whilst the projects described in this report have reached important milestones in terms of implementation it will take time to realise their impact. Oversight of the projects will therefore be provided through the GM Children's Board, the GM DCS meeting and the wider governance that sits around the GM Children & young people programme.
- 5.2. Whilst Government investment in initiatives like the fostering pathfinder programme is welcome it should be noted that this funding will only cover the set-up costs and first year of operations. Therefore, it is important to continue to make the case for sustainable government funding in fostering and kinship care if we are to avoid the requirement for high-cost LAC placements in the longer term. There is also a strong case for the acceleration of the regulation of the LAC placements market described in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care if the high costs for some placements are to be addressed on a national level.
- 5.3. Similarly, building on the learning from areas of the country like Greater Manchester and London boroughs that are taking regional action to address the high costs of agency social workers through models such as the Pledge there is a case to be made for accelerating the implementation of statutory guidance on this issue that as it stands has Government suggested will be in place by Autumn 2024.
- 5.4. It should be noted that the projects described in this report represent a relatively small sample of the GM level work overseen by the GM Children's Board that are designed to improve outcomes for children & young people in the city-region. Other examples of

work overseen by the GM Children's Board include School Readiness, SEND, Care Leavers, Youth Justice, Complex Safeguarding, Children & Young People's Mental Health and the #Beewell Programme. Given the many challenges facing children & young people in the region it is proposed that a further update be brought to GMCA in forthcoming months covering a broader range of programme activity. Leaders are requested to identify the programmes that they are most keen to hear more about as part of this update.

Appendix – Commitments within the ‘GM Pledge’

Each local authority agrees to:

- Commit to working within the pay rates and protocols of the GM Pledge from **November 2023**. This will apply to **new** engagements active from this date. Each DCS will agree a timeline for the transition of existing workers which reflects local circumstances.
- **Bring any existing agency workers** who exceed the new GM Pledge pay rates **in line with the pay rates** and timelines as agreed with each LA.
- **Bring any existing project or Managed Teams to an end within 6 months** of the go live date of October 2023
- **Introduce a standard reference template** for all candidates that relates to standard of practice for any agency worker
- **Not to engage candidates leaving a permanent contract in GM** to take up an agency role in GM for a minimum of 6 months
- **Refrain from headhunting staff from GM** boroughs, unless for a promotional role
- **Work closely with the agency supply chain** to better enable their support of permanent recruitment activities across GM
- **Hold one another to account and provide mutual support** and assistance to other GM LAs e.g. short term provision of staff or leadership advice and support in specific areas
- **Provide accurate and complete data** to the GMCA’s HR metrics service on a quarterly basis