

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 29th November 2024

Subject: GM Children & Young People programme update

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

Purpose of Report

Update GMCA on a selection of strategically significant work areas as part of the GM Children & Young People's programme including:

- GM Pledge
- GM Regional Care Cooperative Pathfinder
- Project Skyline
- GM Fostering Programme
- Development of the Joint Forward Plan for Children & Young People
- GM Care Leavers Offer

Recommendations:

The GMCA is requested to:

1. Note the updates on the Children and Young People's Programme and in particular:
 - the positive impact of the 'GM Pledge' on tackling the high cost of agency social workers.
 - Greater Manchester's status as a national pathfinder for the Regional Care Cooperative approach and the ambition to extend this beyond the current pathfinder period subject to support from GM local authorities.
 - the establishment of the Foster for GM Hub and the ambition to sustain the hub and associated GM fostering approach for a further 12 months.

2. Endorse the proposal to extend the existing travel offer for care-experienced young people up to age 25, subject to funding being identified and approved as part of the Transport Budget setting process.

The Mayor is requested to:

3. Approve the proposal to extend the existing travel offer for care-experienced young people up to age 25, subject to funding being identified and approved as part of the Transport Budget setting process.

Contact Officers

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1. Introduction/Background

- 1.1 The information in this report is presented on behalf of the Greater Manchester Children & Young People's Board and follows up on the commitment made in previous reports for more regular reporting to the Combined Authority on the children & young people portfolio and the Greater Manchester Children & Young People's programme.
- 1.2 Since the last report at the end of March within the city region there has been much to celebrate for our Local Authority children's services departments, for example we have seen Oldham upgraded to 'Good' following its full inspection of children's services, positive JTAI reports for Manchester City Council and Rochdale Council and an 'outstanding' SEND inspection in Bolton.
- 1.3 At the same time following a reinspection in December 2023 that rated Tameside's children's services as inadequate, the Children's Services Commissioner was requested by DfE to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself and identify the key elements that need to be addressed to affect the necessary improvements. In response Tameside have clearly set out their commitment to making the substantial and sustainable improvements required to fulfil their responsibility to the children, young people and families in the borough.
- 1.4 In truth there are no quick fixes to some of the challenges facing children's services departments. At the recent Budget Government announced there will be some additional spend in some key areas including SEND, fostering and family hubs, however full details of what this will mean in real terms for GM local authorities is still to emerge with further details expected as part of the upcoming local government finance settlement.
- 1.5 From a policy perspective Government last week set out its approach to delivering end-to-end reform to children's social care and the system of support for children and families in the form of a policy statement from the Secretary of State ([Keeping children safe, helping families thrive - GOV.UK](#)). Of particular relevance to the areas of work described in this report are a commitment to support more children to live with kinship carers or in fostering families, rather than in residential care and plans to introduce a range of measures to tackle profiteering within the children's residential care market.

1.6 Whilst further detail will emerge in due course Government have made clear their intention to shine a light on the levels of profit being made and bring greater visibility to the prices local authorities are paying. This includes the prospect of action to cap profits being taken in the future if these measures do not sufficiently improve the functioning of the market and reduce costs that arise from unnecessarily high levels of profit. There is also direct reference to legislating for the creation of Regional Care Cooperatives nationally learning from the two pathfinder areas, of which Greater Manchester as described in this report is currently one.

2. GM Pledge for workforce stability in children's social care

2.1 The GM Pledge was launched in November 2023 and is designed to address budget pressures created by use of high-cost agency social workers whilst also improving the experience and lives of our children and families by providing a stable and high-quality workforce. As reported previously the GM pledge involves GM local authorities committing to a number of 'rules' around their use of agency social workers, most notably a cap on the maximum rate of pay. This is monitored through a detailed compliance and outcomes report produced by GMCA and reviewed on a bi-monthly basis by GM DCS and HR Directors groups.

2.2 Success to date: Based on a comparison of monthly data collections undertaken in September 2023 and twelve months later in August 2024 the impact of the Pledge has been positive across 9 out of the 10 local authorities. The exception to this is Tameside which as noted in the Commissioners report has faced significant challenges with workforce stability; which subsequently can have a knock on effect on the high use and spend on agency social workers. As highlighted above Tameside are committed to addressing these issues and GMCA and the other GM local authorities are also committed to working alongside Tameside council to explore how it can re-align with the GM pledge and tackle some of the wider workforce challenges facing the authority.

2.3 Analysing the data for the nine GM local authorities that have remained committed to the GM pledge we have seen the following patterns over the last 12 months:

- The number of social work agency assignments has reduced in 5/10 districts.
- There has been a 63% reduction in over cap assignments.

- Between Oct 2023 and Aug 2024, based on charge rates at end of month, annualised spend on all Pledge agency roles has fallen by approx. £5,7m (£44.2m reduced to £38.5m) across the nine local authorities.

2.4 In September 2024 new national guidance on the use of agency child and family social workers was published. The GM Pledge has recently been reviewed and updated to reflect the requirements of the new national guidance/agency rules. Whilst there are some differences and additional requirements these are not significant and through its work on the pledge GM is in a strong position regarding the adoption of these national requirements.

2.5 The GM Pledge forms part of a wider strategic workforce programme that is being developed to respond to child and family social worker recruitment and retention challenges. This work currently includes:-

- the development of a sector intelligence report on the children's services workforce
- reviewing the use of GMACS to promote children's social worker careers and pathways
- exploring the inclusion of children's social care in the development of a technical route for the MBacc health and social care gateway
- reviewing careers promotion work in schools/colleges
- Northwest regional workforce recruitment campaign

3. Regional Care Cooperative Pathfinder

3.1 In early 2024, Greater Manchester's bid was selected to form one of only two pathfinder areas for the Department for Education's (DfE) Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) programme.

3.2 The RCC will be formed of 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). The purpose of RCCs (source: Stable Homes Built on Love) is to:

- Develop a regional view of sufficiency through data sharing
- Shape the market better with more accurate information to improve planning for care
- Better economies of scale

- Better support for foster carers
- Better collaboration with health and justice to improve services for children in care
- Better planning and running of homes for children with complex needs
- Increased transparency of the cost of care
- Improved commissioning practices
- A clear focus on excess profit making

3.3 The DfE has provided Greater Manchester funding of £1.5m and £5m respectively for (i) the set-up of the RCC in shadow form (running from April 2024 through March 2025) ahead of an official launch on 1st April 2025 and (ii) the creation of new regional residential/foster provision through a capital grant.

3.4 During Q1 and Q2 of 2024/25, the RCC Pathfinder Team hosted at GMCA and supported by the DfE's national support partner, Mutual Ventures, carried out a codesign process alongside LAs and Partners (Health, GMP, MoJ, Providers, Care Experienced Young People, VCSFE Sector, Ofsted) to establish a proposal for the GM RCC to officially launch on 1st April 2025, in line with the DfE's expectations through the grant award.

3.5 The mission for the Greater Manchester RCC is:

- *'To ensure all children and young people looked after in Greater Manchester have a stable, loving home, are healthy and achieve positive outcomes.'*

3.6 The vision for the Greater Manchester RCC expands further:

- *'We will tackle the challenges facing the children's social care market including sufficiency of placements, high costs and recruiting and retaining a quality workforce. We will be ambitious and collaborative with partners across health, youth justice and the voluntary sector to maximise our collective power and influence to deliver a sustainable model. We will keep the voices of children and young people looked after at the heart of everything we do.'*

3.7 The introduction of the RCC comes at a time when latest [published outturn figures for local authority revenue expenditure](#) suggest GM collectively spent at least £820m on children's social care across 2023/24, including over £450m purely on looked after children.

3.8 The five accompanying strategic priorities for the RCC illustrate in more detail what the organisation hopes to achieve in service of the mission and vision:

- **Strengthen governance to deliver swift and effective regional decision-making**, involving care experienced young people and partner organisations.
- **Improve value for money and strengthen market shaping by moving to an agile, needs led commissioning approach** using insights from the RCC Data and Demand Forecasting Platform to inform an accurate picture of regional sufficiency.
- **Invest in new high quality regional provision** with partners and strengthen joint funding and service arrangements to improve value for money.
- **Increase the volume and quality of foster carers and retain the workforce** to improve outcomes for children and young people looked after.
- **Develop and support the needs of the children's residential, fostering and commissioning workforce** in health and local authorities to improve outcomes for children and young people looked after.

3.9 Through these priorities, the RCC aims to strike a balance between activities that benefit from a regional efficiency of scale and those that are better coordinated from a place of bespoke local knowledge. It is therefore anticipated that the RCC will carry out new and additive functions (that would not otherwise be done within the confines of individual Local Authority budgets and staffing arrangements). The aim is for these is to improve ways of working collaboratively, bring together best practice, help Local Authorities achieve better value for money and improve the outcomes for children and young people in Greater Manchester.

3.10 By working collectively through the RCC, Greater Manchester will be able to do more to make these improvements than working in isolation. Amalgamating data into a single view will provide the region with an improved perspective on regional sufficiency which can then be shared with providers. It will also help to understand where high-cost, high-need provision is required and how it should be shared to ensure that no one Local Authority is left holding undue risk.

3.11 By banding together as one RCC, the 10 local authorities will have a louder voice to shape what providers invest in and where this provision is located. Currently, local

authorities do not have a sense of what agreements providers reach with their neighbours. The RCC will encourage pricing transparency across the region.

- 3.12 The RCC will also drive new market interventions for complex placements e.g. Skyline, which are too risky for individual local authorities to maintain on a 'just in case' basis. By democratising access to these placements, more children will receive the care which they need, not just what is available when they enter the children's social care system.
- 3.13 Workforce is another key focus of the RCC. We plan to develop and grow the workforce via skills bootcamps for residential care and a recruitment campaign for the residential care workforce. Furthermore, we will implement a gold standard workforce plan to support staff working in Skyline homes. These workstreams will aim to grow, retain, and support a high-quality workforce in residential homes. It is recognised that increasing provision is not helpful without also investing in the workforce and will ensure that these aims go hand in hand.
- 3.14 The GM RCC programme is governed through a Board set up specifically for the purpose of overseeing the development of the RCC model and delivery of specific projects that make up the current pathfinder programme. This is chaired by the portfolio lead chief executive and is attended by three GM DCSs, senior representatives from NHS GM, Mutual Ventures and the Department for Education.
- 3.15 The pathfinder funding was provided to help establish the RCC but if it is to formally launch in 2025, its continued operation will need to be funded locally. Proposals for achieving this are currently being developed through discussion with the Greater Manchester Local Authorities.
- 3.16 As referenced above as part of DfE's latest policy statement 'Keeping children safe; helping families thrive' have announced that it will legislate to enable groups of local authorities to set up RCCs. This will include setting out the RCC functions, which will be similar to the requirements for the pathfinders but with options for local authorities to decide if they want the RCC to take on a greater range of functions.

3.17 Government have also announced that they plan to legislate for the creation an RCC function. This will give government the power to direct local authorities to establish an RCC if necessary, for example in the case of failure of local authorities to perform their own statutory functions effectively, and to intervene if an RCC is not delivering services to a required standard. The legislation will also give Ofsted (and other inspectorates) the power to inspect RCCs.

4. Project Skyline

4.1 As reported previously to GMCA, 'Project Skyline' is a project of significant strategic importance in our ambition to create supply of the type of children's residential care home provision most needed in the city-region. Since the last report in March 2024, Project Skyline has made progress across all workstreams.

4.2 Partnership Agreement - Weightmans LLP were procured earlier in the year to provide legal support to all 10 GM LAs to create the Partnership Agreement. GM Legal Officers are meeting with Weightmans LLP weekly to work through the agreement. A final version of the Partnership Agreement is expected towards the end of November with signing expected in January 2025. Local authorities that have not already done so have been requested to take through their relevant cabinet meetings to request delegated authority to sign the agreement.

4.3 Procurement - Market Engagement sessions with prospective providers were in held in July 2024. Following this, GMCA, alongside GM LA commissioners and health colleagues, ran competitive dialogue sessions with the prospective bidders throughout August. The bidding window closed on the 1st October and competitive bids were received for all lots. Moderation of quality and pricing is now complete and GMCA will be in a position to recommend a provider to the Skyline Programme Board in late November.

4.4 Property Purchase - Significant work has been undertaken alongside Local Authority Commissioners to identify high quality homes across GM for children in care. A sub-committee meets bi-weekly to review properties and make recommendations to Skyline Board. Two properties have been acquired with additional properties across the city-region currently moving through conveyancing. The project is on track to have completed the purchase of 5-6 properties by April 2025. Once appointed, the provider

will work closely with the GMCA Project Team to mobilise the homes quickly. Conversations are also taking place with Ofsted in recognition of the current delays around registration of the homes recognising its potential impact on the operationalisation of the homes.

5. GM Fostering Programme

5.1 Greater Manchester is one of nine regional pathfinders for the DfE Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme. The programme aims to increase the number of Local Authority foster carers and improve retention. The programme consists of 3 key components

- A Greater Manchester recruitment support hub hosted by Rochdale Council to provide information about fostering for your Local Authority and improve the customer journey from initial enquiry to application.
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the city-region to support retention of foster carers.
- A regional marketing campaign to attract new foster carers.

5.2 The Foster for GM Hub has been operational since June and fully staffed from October. There are some positive early signs in terms of the conversion rate from initial enquiry to initial visit; although not an identical comparison, from July to October 2024, 17.6% of initial enquiries completed an initial visit, 2 percentage points higher than the conversion rate over the same period in 2023. This demonstrates an improved customer journey that is more consistent and responsive to the needs of prospective foster carers.

5.3 Foster Care Ambassadors from across the 10 Fostering Services have been recruited to support the Hub activity and are matched with prospective foster carers so that they can share their experience of fostering for their Local Authority. Qualitative feedback highlights the value and importance of those ambassadors in helping prospective foster carers to decide whether fostering is right for them and assuring them that fostering with their Local Authority is the right choice.

5.4 Alongside the development of the Foster for GM Hub work has also begun on the implementation or expansion of the Mockingbird model. 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. One new or additional constellation has been set up in 5 Local Authorities in the past 12 months and a further 4 will be implemented before the end of the financial year 2024/25. The fostering team at Stockport Council, who have extensive experience of the model, alongside the Fostering Network have provided support to Local Authorities to ensure their successful implementation.

5.5 To support our fostering communications and marketing campaign DfE allocated £323,186 to strengthen the existing campaign. Following feedback and consultation with LA Fostering Services and Foster Carers the previous 'Fostering Unfiltered' campaign, launched in summer 2023, has become 'Foster for Greater Manchester'. The website and customer relationship management (CRM) system have been further developed to ensure integration with the operational processes of the Foster for GM Hub and there has been enhanced localisation of the campaign brand, website and marketing materials to emphasise the messaging about fostering for your local authority. Reach PLC have been commissioned to increase messaging through local media outlets including MEN and via social media channels and a Behavioural Insights evaluation from Brand Edge will help better target campaign activity and messaging from November 2024 onwards.

5.6 GM Local Authorities and GMCA have formally signed up to the Fostering Networks 'Foster Friendly' scheme which gives foster carers employed by the organisation additional flexibility and time-off to respond to the needs of being a foster carer. This will make Greater Manchester the 1st city region to have all LAs signed up to the scheme.

5.7 DfE has announced further investment for the regional fostering programmes although at the time of writing it is unclear how much GM can expect to receive. The funding should at least be sufficient to part-fund the recruitment support hub and further regional communications activity for a further 12 months. A business case detailing the annual costs for the recruitment support hub and communications will reflect this funding allocation before it presented to GM local authorities as part of a investment case for further funding.

5.8 While early indications and feedback in relation the Foster for GM Hub are positive it has been widely acknowledged regionally and nationally from the inception of the programme that a minimum of 12 months evidence would be required to determine the longer-term sustainability and impact of the recruitment hub.

6. GM Care Leaver Guarantee

6.1 The GM Care Leaver Guarantee was first launched in 2019 with the ten GM local authorities and partner organisations coming together to create a series of entitlements and offers to help care leavers lead happy and healthy lives and to achieve their goals. This includes council tax exemption, free health prescriptions, free bus pass and discounted tram travel for care leavers up to the age of 21, a wide range of pre-employment and employment support programmes continue and a package of support from colleges and universities, via GM Higher, for care leavers to access further and higher education.

6.2 A GM Participation Network, with representation from care leavers across the 10 GM LAs and linking into the 10 Care Leaver Forums, has been instrumental in further developing the offer and opportunities available to care leavers and improving communication. Care Leavers have representation on the GM Care Leaver Trust Board to ensure they have an equal voice in shaping priorities and decision making.

6.3 The GM Care Leavers Trust Board has recently asked TfGM to consider extending free travel offer to care-experienced young people up to the age of 25. Survey evidence suggests strong support for an extension of the offer amongst this cohort. As a reminder the travel offer for care-experienced young people in Greater Manchester (GM) aged 18-21 was launched in summer 2019, with the aim of supporting this cohort through the transition to a more independent life. The offer provides free anytime travel for those aged 18-21 (who are on a care pathway) on most buses in GM. It also includes half price off peak and weekend travel on the Metrolink network. Care leavers are encouraged to apply for this offer with support from their Personal Advisers and, like Our Pass, the pass also provides access to a number of 'exclusives' such as discounts, events, and activities.

- 6.4 Amending the local concession scheme to extend the existing offer to provide free travel for care leavers up to the age of 25 is expected to increase the number of cardholders by approximately 1,600, to 2,800, with an incremental annual net cost of up to c. £450,000 per annum, which will represent revenue foregone in the bus franchising income statement. This will need to be managed in the context of the wider position on the bus franchising net funding position. In addition, it is estimated that implementation costs will be in the region of £85,000, to be funded from the 2024/25 Franchised Bus budget. Funding for the proposal would need to be identified through the Transport Budget setting process.
- 6.5 To ensure sufficient time to implement the offer, update systems and train staff, it is proposed that the extended travel pass for care leavers aged up to 25 is introduced from April 2025. Implementation in April 2025 will also provide time to advertise the offer properly to care-experienced young people in the city region. TfGM will work with the Care Leaver's Trust Board and local authorities to publicise this change to eligible young people.
- 6.6 In October 2022 the Bee Connected App was launched to promote the GM Care Leaver Guarantee and 10 LA Local Offers directly to care leavers and to those that work directly with them. Further improvements to the Bee Connected App have been made and a Care Leaver apprentice has recently been recruited by GMCA to support the delivery of the care leaver work programme which will include regular updates to the App in collaboration with the leads in each of the Leaving Care Services.
- 6.7 The Greater Manchester Housing Providers launched their revised Housing Pledges during Care Leavers week and will offer improved access to housing and support to maintain their tenancy. Care Leavers have also worked alongside the Housing Providers and Greater Manchester Youth Network (GMYN) to develop a training programme for Housing Officers to raise awareness of those pledges and ensure their implementation.
- 6.8 A GM Digital Inclusion Programme has now provided free digital devices, data or training to over 1600 care leavers and in 2023 won the Community Improvement category at the Connected Britain Awards in recognition of its achievements. More

work is now underway to source additional digital devices due to the success and continued high level of demand from care leavers.

6.9 Throughout 2024 Local Authorities have worked with their elected members to secure care leaver status as a protected characteristic which will provide the same legal protection against discrimination as other listed characteristics. It could provide greater authority to employers, businesses, public services, and policy makers to put in place policies and programmes which promote better outcomes for care experienced people.

6.10 Finally, the GM Care Leaver Trust Board has recently agreed to roll out the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) Kite Mark to all colleges, sixth forms and independent education providers that have an annual pupil intake of approximately 300 pupils. This will be delivered over the next 3 years with 10 education providers working towards and achieving accreditation each academic year. This would make Greater Manchester the 1st city region to have all education providers of that size accredited by NNECL and will enhance accessibility and the support offered to care leavers who would like to access further education.

6.11 Latest high-level DfE data on care leaver outcomes suggests that Greater Manchester services are working hard to respond to increased demand and the attendant challenges of supporting this vulnerable cohort in the aftermath of the pandemic and a subsequent cost of living crisis. Leaving care services are 'in touch' with ~93% of GM care leavers, a stabilised position and positive achievement in light of a further 7% year-on-year increase in the number of care experienced 17-21 year olds. Participation figures suggest +57% of care leavers are in education training or employment, the highest figure since 2017/18 (also now higher than the England figure for the first time since the pandemic). And +89% of care leavers are in settled/suitable accommodation, a reversal of a downwards trend recorded in the data since 2019/20.

7. NHS GM Joint Forward Plan for Children & Young People

7.1 As reported in March, an NHS GM Joint Forward Plan for Children & Young People has been developed as part of the NHS GM Strategic Financial Framework. The vision for the Joint Forward Plan is for 'an integrated approach to improving outcomes for

children and young people and tackling inequalities that puts the needs and experience of children, young people and families at the heart of our ambitions’.

7.2 The Joint Forward Plan provides a clear set of shared priorities that respond to the needs of children and young people in our communities and demands in the system (with an emphasis on prevention). It will help us steer commissioning locally and GM level and will be used to support decision making around the allocation of resources.

7.3 Following a period of consultation the Joint Forward Plan was signed off by the GM NHS Executive in September. To support implementation of the priorities within the plan progress is being reported to the NHS GM Children & Young People’s Systems Group chaired by the Chief Nurse and attended by officers from across the GM system acknowledging that this is a joint plan and improving health outcomes for children and young people cannot be the responsibility of any single organisation.

8. Conclusions

8.1 DfE’s agreement to provide funding to Greater Manchester as pathfinder sites for both fostering and the Regional Care Cooperative reforms suggests government is recognising the opportunity of greater city-regional collaboration around children’s services. We have seen already the impact of initiatives such as the GM pledge on addressing the high costs of agency staff for the majority of our local authorities. We now face an important period of building up the evidence from our other areas of regional collaboration most notably the RCC and fostering programmes. This will require some level of commitment and small investment from GM local authorities, however this will be insignificant compared to the potential benefits to both council budgets and improved outcomes for our children & young people.

8.2 A further update is planned for the new year that will update on other aspects of our regional collaboration around children & young people, most notably #Beewell, Education, Early Years and Family help. It is anticipated that by this point there will also be further detail on the likely implications of the Children’s Welfare Bill the local government settlement and the spending review.