

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Date: 13th December 2024

Subject: Breaking Down barriers to Opportunity- A Proposal for a stronger Education System as part of GMS- to enable young people to participate & thrive across GM.

Report of: Kate Green- Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester, Councillor Eamonn O'Brien, Portfolio Lead for Technical Education and Councillor Mark Hunter, Portfolio Lead for Children & Young People

Purpose of Report

This paper provides a focused overview of key areas across the education landscape from (Early Years to post 16) that if worked on with more intentionality, focus and with a GM and or combined national approach we would see improved outcomes for the sector and thus for young people. It seeks the approval and commitment from the GMCA to formalise the joint work programme outlined in the paper ensuring the right governance to take forward action that demonstrably shows GM to be the first Combined Authority to make this bold step in place. It has been drafted in partnership with and endorsed by senior officers in all ten local authorities and the combined authority.

Recommendations:

The GMCA is recommended to:

1. Agree that there should be a greater focus on education in the Greater Manchester Strategy.
2. Agree that the areas outlined in this paper are the priorities for this work.
3. Agree that work on promoting inclusive mainstream schools, improving attendance, on making GM the best place to teach and on post 16 sufficiency should be taken forward immediately, noting that these areas do not require agreement from central government.
4. Agree that officers should further develop this proposal, working with the education sector and partners alongside senior officers from LAs. This will include developing proposals which can be taken forward at GM level now and proposing solutions which require national government action.

Contact Officers

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Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:

Recommendation - Key points for decision-makers

Insert text

Impacts Questionnaire

Impact Indicator	Result	Justification/Mitigation
Equality and Inclusion		
Health		
Resilience and Adaptation		
Housing		
Economy		
Mobility and Connectivity		
Carbon, Nature and Environment		
Consumption and Production		
Contribution to achieving the GM Carbon Neutral 2038 target	Currently this is just for further consultation	
Further Assessment(s):	N/A	

G Positive impacts overall, whether long or short term.

A Mix of positive and negative impacts. Trade-offs to consider.

R Mostly negative, with at least one positive aspect. Trade-offs to consider.

RR Negative impacts overall.

Risk Management

Consultation at this stage- limited risk

Legal Considerations

There are no legal implications arising directly from this Report. Further decisions may be required from the GMCA or other decision makers in due course to implement the proposals sent out in this Report and relevant legal implications will be considered at that time. The GMCA is able to work collaboratively with others and can utilise the Wellbeing Power in s2 of the Local Government Act 2000 where it does not have other more specific functions.

Financial Consequences – Revenue

None at this stage

Financial Consequences – Capital

None

Number of attachments to the report: 0

Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Early stages of consultation- Scrutiny will form part of ongoing work plan

Background Papers

None

Tracking/ Process

Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution

No

Exemption from call in

Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?

Bee Network Committee

None

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

None

1. Introduction/Background

Greater Manchester's long history of partnership working, as reflected in the Greater Manchester Strategy, has for some years included a focus on children and has recognised the **importance of the education sector**. We know that we **will not achieve any of our ambitions for Greater Manchester without a focus on children and young people**. They must simultaneously be the purpose for all joint endeavour and the key beneficiaries of it.

This focus whilst it has been successful must be intensified, because the **challenges our children face have increased**, in both their scale and their complexity.

- **4.3 million children in the UK live in poverty**. That is 9 children in every classroom. 7 in 10 of these children live in households where at least 1 parent works.
- **Disadvantaged pupils have, on average, lower attainment than other pupils** and this gap widens as pupils progress through their education.
- only 8% of mental health spending is allocated to CYP mental health provision, despite them making up 30% of the demand.
- There has been a **72% increase in the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) nationally since 2019**.
- Over 20% of students nationally are recorded as 'persistently absent' from school
- There has been an increase of 33,485 students nationally attending alternative provision and special schools since 2015.
- Less than half (45.7%) of 16-18 study leavers in 2020/21 in GM went on to a UK higher education institution. However, when considered as a proportion of the overall cohort (not just those completing 16-18 studies) this drops to a little over a third (34.8%) – meaning that around two-thirds of young people did not progress into higher education.

In order to address the current challenges facing the education sector a step change in our approach is required. Whilst, the case for change is well-rehearsed at a national level, we now we have an opportunity to act at GM level in order to support **the Government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, at every stage and shatter the class ceiling**. by:

- **Being purpose driven** and focusing on areas across GM that coming together delivers more than the sum of its parts.

- **Delivering things differently and better**, working together across the education sector, our ten Local Authorities and with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on key areas.
- **Implementing things first and acting as a leader** on those areas of policy which require innovation⁵.

Evidence of strong education collaboration and action across the ten localities can be traced back many years but none more striking than during the Covid-19 pandemic which set the foundations of the work proposed in this paper and articulates a bolder intention concerning improved outcomes for young people.

Education is the foundation of **hope and aspiration and the springboard to economic growth**. GM already has a strong track record of collaborative working in areas of **school readiness, careers education, information advice and guidance, the post-16 functions and supports cross-GM work on SEND, as well as violence reduction, attendance and linking health initiatives to schools to name a few**. However, we know that GMS, while setting out the city-region's ambition to support young people in education, has not been sufficiently engaging of schools nor invested in those areas of policy which affect schools and seek to improve outcomes for young people in the pre-16 age group. This paper outlines how we might change that.

Over the past six months the priorities, below, have been identified by the system partners to be **the focus of our collaboration**. These priorities support our collective desire to **improve life chances of every child and young person** in Greater Manchester:

- Focus, relentlessly, on the **Early Years**
- Reduce **Child Poverty**
- Reform **Inspections**
- Overhaul the **SEND System**
- Resolve the **academy question and strengthen the role of the LA**
- The importance of **curriculum and assessment**
- Enable **post-16** to deliver greater alignment with labour market needs and positive outcomes for learners- building on the devo trailblazer agreement
- Be the **best place to teach** and to work in education across age groups.

These priorities are not a reflection of a deficit in our education system, on the contrary a national focus on improving standards in schools over the last three decades has undoubtedly improved the quality of our schools. **Children achieve better at all key**

stages, our schools are well led and benefit from skilled and committed teachers and school support staff.

However, despite, or perhaps as an unintended consequence of, these improvements, there has been a **deterioration in the quality and consistency of inclusion**. This can be seen in the massive rise in EHCPs, the **significant increase in persistent absence and severe absence** where young people with SEND, SEMH, on FSM or from particular ethnic groups, are all too often disproportionately represented; and it can be seen in the **increases in both exclusions and elective home education**.

As well as addressing the challenges above, these priorities are focused on **further embedding our education led system**, one which is built on partnerships, between schools, colleges, with Multi Academy Trusts and with local and combined authorities. Further partnership work between leaders in schools, local and combined authorities will bring benefits to us all and will bring **education leaders into the centre of all our work in Greater Manchester**. By strengthening the school system we can ensure better alignment and responsiveness in the face of challenges that need a system response such as **addressing challenges faced in post-16** including capacity, attainment in all phases and increasing positive participation whilst reducing numbers of NEET young people.

We know that **a strong school led system must be complemented by strong local authorities** who are confident in their role and properly resourced to deliver. Furthermore, we believe that **working at a Greater Manchester level with the GMCA** on those issues which require our joint attention will have transformative impact on our education system.

2. Proposed focus- Building on a strong foundation

Greater Manchester has years of experience in coming together to tackle issues for the benefit of all residents. Children & young people are a clear priority for all local areas and significant partners, as well as the Mayor.

This proposal is building on the success we have already demonstrated. Working together using existing structures across Greater Manchester for example, our school readiness programme, the excellent work Local Areas already do with the DfE on key areas of policy (SEND Change Programme, AP) and most recently through our GM Local Attendance Action Alliance.

Our work with the Dame Rachel de Souza (Children's Commissioner for England) and the DfE on the GM Local Attendance Action Alliance has demonstrated the ability of

GM to act together, to act at pace and to deliver impact and sets a template for this new way of working. Continuing this work on improving attendance is an immediate priority and should be taken forward without delay.

Others such as The SEND Board, School Readiness Board and the GM Careers Hub along with two education summits including the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate have shown we can deliver *at pace*. The **structures of collaboration are in place**, the relationships already exist and we are clear about our priorities and our ambition for:

- Greater Manchester to **the best place to teach** and to work in education (all institutions)
- Every family to be able to **choose an excellent school**
- All children & young people both to want to attend and to **attend school/college every day**
- Every child/Young Person to **achieve well** at school and **move confidently** into their further education, training or employment
- All of our communities to **share in the success of our Greater Manchester economy**

3. Purpose driven to deliver better

Building on our strong foundations, there are areas which with a clear political steer and combined resources, GM could deliver better outcomes across all places. GM has a history of not asking permission- doing what it can locally before needing to ask Government.

Our proposal here will once again build on this approach. We have identified a set of actions to be taken forward now. These are on areas where both urgent action is needed (SEND, Attendance and teacher recruitment and retention) and where the commitment and permission to act has been given locally. We have also identified actions which need further work and discussion with central government. In these areas there is a potential to move further into the devolution space following the first year Spending Review and push for greater regional leadership across the education space, linking to strong GMS outcomes. *The following sections set out the areas of focus whereby coming together across the 10, plus the GMCA and the sector delivers more than the sum of the parts.*

4. Further strengthening our focus on the Early Years

We know that investment in the Early Years has the greatest impact for children and is the most cost effective investment that we can make. That is why the Early Years and School Readiness have been a priority in Greater Manchester for many years. This focus had delivered significant improvements which the developmental gap between children eligible for free school meals and their more affluent peers narrowing significantly. However, the COVID 19 pandemic put back the progress of this work. We must re-galvanise our system to the priority.

In Greater Manchester, we've been working on a framework to improve the skills of early years workers. This can be expanded nationwide. We are also making improvements to vocational training programs (like T-levels) in Education and Early Years to create clearer career pathways for young people interested in working in this sector. Through the Integrated Settlement GM can target funding to ensure the uptake of places across young people & adults- Using the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate as a driving force for change and aspiration.

We also must refocus on an integrated model in the early years with education, child care, health and wider children services working together to support children and their families. With greater focus on the role of early education provision within Family Help. Connecting families in with wider support where it's needed. Through the LiveWell manifesto commitment GM can look to work differently with the sector and build around a place.

5. Child Poverty

The biggest barrier to many children's achievement in school and their future life chances is poverty. Unless poverty affecting children reduces, we cannot combat effectively the attainment gap which is once again growing between the most and least disadvantaged children.

The role of schools will be critical to developing and implementing the Government's new Child Poverty Strategy, as the Education Secretary noted in launching the taskforce, *"tackling child poverty is at the heart of breaking down barriers to opportunity and improving the life chances for every child. For too many children, living in poverty leaves them not ready to learn and robbed of opportunity"*.

Greater Manchester's education community wants to join this work and would be willing to act as a pathfinder to implementation of the strategy- this however would take commitment from Government.

6. Reform Inspections

We must reform our inspection framework so that it supports school leaders, encouraging them to innovate and lead confidently equally considering how young people succeed in school and how they will succeed in life. It must also provide the flexibility for schools to succeed in their place, accommodating local priorities and reflecting local agreements and innovations, such as the proposed MBacc.

The new Government is seeking to reform the inspection system to better support school leaders, allowing flexibility to meet local priorities and encouraging a balance between academic success and inclusion. This reform would ensure schools serve their communities, with a focus on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the representation of the wider local area. The Government also plans to introduce a new "Excellence in Leadership Programme" for headteachers, and create Regional Improvement Teams to enhance school-to-school collaboration. They emphasize the importance of peer review alongside Ofsted judgements to offer a more comprehensive view of school performance.

The ask would be that the new Regional Improvement Teams should be a function of combined authorities bringing Local Authorities (LAs) and MATs together. This would most accurately reflect that accountability and statutory responsibility should remain at place level and would be a helpful focus for partnership working with school leaders.

7. Overhaul of the SEND system

This is a clear area that requires joint working and design with the new Government to tackle the failure in the system. There are many areas highlighted in the annex which need more than the current levers and resource allow and this is something GM could be pushing more for in terms of the next Spending Review window.

We welcome the commitment in the Kings Speech to require "all schools to co-operate with local authorities on place planning, admissions and SEND inclusion". We think this cooperation should include a strengthening of the LA role, placing a duty on schools to cooperate with their Local Authority in delivering integrated children's services in their local

area focused on prevention, and require schools to be a named statutory partner to local safeguarding arrangements with a specific focus on improving attendance and reducing exclusions.

Local Authorities in Greater Manchester are already working together closely through the GM SEND Board and in partnership with the DfE on a number of key initiatives (SEND Change Programme, GM LAAA). This work should be accelerated and further promoted. Local Authorities senior officers will work together immediately to do this with a focus on inclusive mainstream schools.

8. Resolve the Academy Question

It is a perverse impact of the academisation of schools that the policy, which intended to devolve power to schools, has in turn centralised the oversight of schools to the DfE. This must be addressed. It does not mean we should establish further or additional tiers of oversight. We should simplify with MATs being more accountable at place level to communities within existing structures. We can build on our partnerships and the structures which already exist. These partnership at local and GM level are strong.

9. Strengthening the role of LAs

We must strengthen the role of the LA, because whilst the role and responsibilities of the LA in education is clear, in too many areas LAs do not have the powers or the resources to deliver these. Improving funding for Local Authorities in education is a critically important issue.

The partnership at local and GM level are strong. But we also have the opportunity to improve our partnership working between schools and local and combined authorities and should increase the role of Combined Authorities in their support of LAs to collaborate and deliver in their areas. This could include models of QA, commissioning and also peer review, to support school improvement and accountability. This will in turn ensure that schools are increasingly accountable to their local community.

10. The Importance of curriculum and assessment

In Greater Manchester, we have excellent teachers, staff and leaders across our school, colleges and providers and are proud of them and of our children and young people who

achieve well. However, they are all being held back by a system that is not allowing all children to fulfil their potential and is making education providers choose between high standards and inclusivity. We strongly believe that both can and must be achieved.

We welcome the launch of the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review and the announcement that following the review all publicly funded schools, including academies will be required to follow the new national curriculum. The current national curriculum and more importantly the way in which we assess children is not fit for purpose. GM has submitted its response already to this review. We have said that to improve outcomes for children and young people across the country and in Greater Manchester, we recommend that less is more when it comes to the curriculum – it is important to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, but the focus should be on the key skills children and young people need for further study, life and a future career. These skills should be relevant to both the modern world we live in as well as relevant to local areas and the economy.

We want to do more. We want to join this work and would be willing to act as a pathfinder to implementation of these reforms- This has already been stated in the Spending Review submission to DfE.

11. Reform post-16 transition to deliver greater alignment with labour market needs and positive outcomes for learners

The 2023 deeper devolution trailblazer deal, recognised for the first time that places like GM should play an important role in strategic oversight of post-16 technical education, and of the impact of the publicly funded careers education, advice and guidance provision being delivered in the city-region. But oversight alone without the levers to drive change is a job half done. What happens pre-16 is inherently linked to post-16 education and the wider outcomes for our young people as they transition into work. There are a number of systemic issues acting as a barrier to young people pursuing a vocational pathway. GM's ambition is to move towards a post-16 system rooted in place and more responsive to local labour markets.

GM is already developing a **Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc)**, which will raise the bar on technical education. The MBacc will provide a clear line of sight to the local labour market by steering young people through seven "gateways" – with GCSEs aligned to each one – that lead to real jobs in the local economy.

MBacc is the vehicle through which we will achieve the vision of an integrated technical education city-region, ensuring that technical education connects more directly to the local economy and the labour market in a place.

GM is also coming together across GMCA, LAs and post-16 providers to work together to understand the challenges caused by the demographic increases and looking at solutions to ensure young people aged 16-18 can participate in further education.

However, there is more that needs to be done- GM is continuing to explore opportunities through devolution to test flexibilities in funding and accountability in GM for the further education system (16-18) to address the anomalies and disincentives in the current system with a strong focus on preventing young people from becoming NEET. A lack of post-16 places, narrowing of technical pathways and declining apprenticeship opportunities for young people all add to the growing number of young people not in employment education or training (NEET) in GM. This is something that GM has stressed in conversations with DfE & DWP in terms of the developing a strong Youth Guarantee alongside the role of MCAs in supporting young people to participate and thrive in the economy.

Connecting what GM is doing already is critical to the success for young people- The Violence Reduction Unit is one example that can support the wider NEET agenda and why GM is the perfect place for a more place-based focus for the developing Youth Guarantee.

Since its launch, the VRU has worked with schools, colleges, hospitals, police, criminal justice partners, charities, and most crucially with communities. The VRU's objective has been to tackle violence and its root causes, with a primary focus on children, young people, and families. The VRU has provided a multi-million-pound investment and commissioned a range of interventions to help achieve these ambitions. Key programmes have included community sports, targeted mentoring, support for parents, work in primary and secondary schools, youth work in hospitals and in the community.

12. The best place to teach and work in education

We know how important brilliant teachers, educators, lecturers and school support staff are and we believe Greater Manchester can be the best place to teach and work in education. However, the challenge we face is great.

We must take bold and decisive action in order to address these challenges. Greater Manchester has fantastic assets, its colleges, universities, teaching schools and other

training providers are outstanding. Greater local control over priorities and flexibility to utilise existing funding and coordination of resources could have a profound impact.

This is another area where we do not need to seek permission to deliver. We will, working together, with school leaders, teaching schools and providers design and implement a *best place to teach plan* for Greater Manchester. This plan building on brilliant work already underway will bring together discussions on training, CPD, and leadership development, more closely with our other key policy priorities on areas such as transport, housing and the economy. With a focus on our challenges and opportunities in the early years, schools and further education.

13. Conclusion

Whilst we know that these challenges are overlapping and interlinked and resolving them requires them to be addressed together, we also know that the public finances are constrained. This paper is primarily intended to address questions of policy. However, **these policy challenges will not be met without sufficient resources** and financially resilient institutions.

However, notwithstanding, the need for investment, this investment cannot be successful unless it is combined with change in both our intention, ensuring that every child succeeds and a change in how we deliver, moving away from an increasingly centralised education system to one which is more locally responsive, more locally accountable, and more locally delivered.

Appendix 2 of this paper sets out the proposal in more detail and explores how a more devolved and place-based approach to education can ensure all our children and young people break down their barriers to opportunity. Whilst in many areas we need a discussion with Government, in order to agree that things can be differently in Greater Manchester, to advocate for changes in policy or funding or to agree that Greater Manchester can do things first acting as a pathfinder for reform. In other areas we do not need permission. We propose to take forward work right now in four of our priority areas:

- SEND promoting inclusive mainstream schools
- Attendance, continuing the work of the GM LAAA
- Best Place to teach – developing our plans to make Greater Manchester the best place to teach and work in education
- Post 16 Sufficiency completing work already underway

Recommendations

The GMCA is recommended to:

- Agree that there should be a greater focus on education in the Greater Manchester Strategy.
- Agree that the areas outlined in this paper are the priorities for this work.
- Agree that work on promoting inclusive mainstream schools, improving attendance, on making GM the best place to teach and on post 16 sufficiency should be taken forward immediately, noting that these areas do not require agreement from central government.
- Agree that officers should further develop this proposal over the next 6 months, working with the education sector and partners alongside senior officers from LAs. This will include developing proposals which can be taken forward at GM level now and propose solutions which require national government action.

Appendix 1 – Governance

Currently the pre 16 education responsibilities at GM Level are overseen within the Children's Portfolio led by Cllr Mark Hunter and Micheal Cullen and are separated from post 16 Skills and Work responsibilities led by Cllr O'Brien & Sara Todd- apart from work offering young people from Primary, secondary through to Post-16 a clear line of sight to good jobs building on Mayoral priorities. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of the Children's portfolio at GM Level has to this point been focused on Children's Social Care and Early Help/Prevention and Early Years priorities.

At local authority level Local Authority GM Education Leads (Directors and Assistant Directors of Education) oversee mature partnerships with school leaders and coordinate partnerships between schools and wider children's services, under the wider leadership of Directors of Children's Services. Whilst these structures differ at local level. They all include, primary, secondary and special school forums and borough wide partnership groups.

GM Education Leads meet monthly. This forum acts as both a forum for collaboration between LAs and as sounding board for GM issues. Throughout the pandemic the group met on a weekly basis and coordinated a GM wide education response. GM DCS's also meet on a monthly basis. Providing leadership on all issues affecting children and coordination to the agenda at GM Level. These structures feed into the GM Children's Board.

In addition, the Greater Manchester Learning Partnership (GMLP) Executive brings together, LA, School and Diocesan leaders. In addition, the GMLP organises regular meetings with Multi Academy Trust CEOs and wider community of practice events for School Leaders. The GMLP has also in recent years coordinated a number of projects including school to school support work on inclusion and peer review of Local Authority Functions (i.e. School Improvement).

A greater focus on education issues at the Greater Manchester level does not mean we should establish further or additional tiers of oversight. Rather, we should build on our partnerships and the structures which already exist. These partnership at local and GM level are strong. Currently the partnerships (described) above work in the following way:



Whilst we do not need to create new governance structures we may need to tweak the membership and / or terms of reference of existing groups. In addition, a greater focus on education issues at Greater Manchester level will require sufficient capacity to lead and deliver the work.

Appendix 2: Our Priorities – In detail

A national focus on improving standards in schools over the last three decades has undoubtedly improved the quality of our schools. **Children achieve better at all key stages, our schools are well led and benefit from skilled and committed teachers and school support staff.**

However, despite, or perhaps as an unintended consequence of, these improvements, there has been a **deterioration in the quality and consistency of inclusion**. This can be seen in the massive rise in EHCPs and subsequent enormous increase in numbers of children attending special schools. It is seen in the **significant increase in persistent absence and severe absence** where young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with social emotional and mental health challenges (SEMH), eligible for free school meals (FSM), open to youth justice services or from particular ethnic groups, are all too often disproportionately represented; and it can be seen in the **increases in both exclusions and elective home education**.

We must reject the notion that we need to choose between a school system which achieves well and schools that are inclusive. The very best schools must do both. We need a school system which ensures **all children both want to attend school and achieve very well when they do** and we must do this in **very difficult financial circumstances**.

School budgets are under huge pressure. The Institute for Fiscal Studies in their [sixth annual report on education spending in England](#) noted the following: *In 2022–23, total public spending on education in the UK stood at £116 billion (including the cost of issuing student loans and in 2023–24 prices). In real terms, this represents an 8% or £10 billion fall since 2010–11.* This is a serious challenge and, taken alongside the rapid increase in demand for SEND services, has contributed to a [national deficit](#) in our high needs funding, now estimated to be in excess of £3bn.

In addition, the services that touch the lives of children and families from **health, social care and the wider public and voluntary sector have been significantly depleted** or ceased. However, this is not simply a question of resource. The policy dynamic for education and vulnerable children has become **increasingly fragmented** and funded in a time-bound way through competitive grants. Government-led programmes (for example, Family Hubs, SEND and AP Programme, and Education Improvement Areas) are not sufficiently connected.

What happens **pre-16 is inherently linked to post-16 education** and the wider outcomes for our young people as they transition into work. There are a number of systemic issues

acting as a barrier to young people pursuing a vocational pathway. **GM's ambition is to move towards a post-16 system rooted in place and more responsive to local labour markets.**

The priorities outlined above and described in detail below are **intended to complement the priorities of Government.** Furthermore they describe and detail some **further steps that can be taken to address these overlapping challenges**

1. **Focus, relentlessly, on the Early Years**

Whilst evidence for focus on the early years is overwhelming, our investment doesn't match. We know that investment in the Early Years has the greatest impact for children and is the most cost effective investment that we can make. That is why the Early Years and School Readiness have been a priority in Greater Manchester for many years. This focus had delivered significant improvements which the developmental gap between children eligible for free school meals and their more affluent peers narrowing significantly. However, the COVID 19 pandemic put back the progress of this work. We must re-galvanise our system to the priority.

An investment in the early years is needed, this includes increasing places in the early years sector. This necessary step is not in itself sufficient, as we must ensure the system is **sustainable** (funding and support must be addressed) **and that quality is improved.** Crucial to this will be addressing the **recruitment and retention challenges** the sector faces. We need to think again about how we attract, train and retain the best colleagues. This could include placing **greater emphasis on apprenticeships in the Early Years**, developing an 'Early Years First' model for school leavers, similar to the Teach First graduate approach. This **model would support young people into the profession whilst in full-time employment.** It would embrace the high turn-over of staff.

Our Greater Manchester work on **our Early Years workforce competency framework can be expanded.** Through this we can invest in workforce and strengthen skills and competencies that support child development. Working with Post 16 providers **we have strengthened T-levels for Education and Early Years.** We have also chosen Education & Early Year as one of the priority Gateways for The MBacc to create the line of sight and qualification pathways to a career in this sector. We want to do more.

We also must refocus on an **integrated model in the early years** with education, child care, health and wider children services working together to support children and their families.

With **greater focus on the role of early education provision within Family Help**. Connecting families in with wider support where it's needed. The recent commitment of the Government to funding early language based interventions is welcome and will make an enormous difference, however, we know from work in GM that before this can take effect we **need to strengthen our targeted offer in the Early Years**. We know that support provided when a child is 18 months old is most effective. This investment in Primary schools must therefore be **matched by an equal investment in the Early Years and through Family Hubs** to target children not in early education.

We must also move away from measuring success by the % of children reaching arbitrary early development milestones. This risks overstating outcomes and instead we must focus on **identifying every child who requires extra support in their early years** and make sure that they receive that support and build the skills and capabilities of all children to achieve well in school.

2. Reduce Child Poverty

The **biggest barrier** to many children's achievement in school and their future life chances is **poverty**. Unless poverty affecting children reduces we cannot combat effectively the attainment gap which is once again growing between the most and least disadvantaged children.

The **role of schools will be critical to developing and implementing the Governments new Child Poverty Strategy**, as the Education Secretary noted in launching the taskforce, *"tackling child poverty is at the heart of breaking down barriers to opportunity and improving the life chances for every child. For too many children, living in poverty leaves them not ready to learn and robbed of opportunity"*.

Greater Manchester's education community **wants to join this work** and would be willing to act as a pathfinder to implementation of the strategy.

In addition, we should require all local authorities to work with their schools to conduct **poverty-proofing audits** identifying the barriers poverty can create and developing plans to address these at school level. This model has been developed within the voluntary and community sector, principally driven by Children North East. It has been universally welcomed by schools who have participated and a number of authorities are interested in this approach. Led by the lived experiences of children, it offers a 360 degree look at the

school day, examining policy, practice and interaction with a final report going to the head-teacher and their senior team for consideration.

The latest data for 2 year old Free Early Education Entitlement eligibility shows a decrease in number eligible due to increased wages but no adjustment to eligibility threshold to impact of inflation on cost of living. Compared to January 2023, 800 fewer children are eligible for the 2-year-old FEEE in Greater Manchester. This is a decline by 6.6%. **In January 2024, 2300 fewer children were eligible for the offer than in January 2022** (around the time the cost-of-living crisis started). Policy **reform is needed** to ensure targeted interventions intended to support are reaching those who need them.

3. Reform Inspections

Our **inspection framework is a contributing factor in both the improvement of our schools and the deterioration in the quality and consistency of inclusion**. It should neither be possible for a school with high levels of persistent absence or suspensions to be judged to be good nor a school with a poor quality of education. Inclusion deserves the same rigour of scrutiny as attainment as they are of **equal importance to a child and family**, their outcomes and life chances.

We must **reform our inspection framework so that it supports school leaders**, encouraging them to innovate and lead confidently equally considering how young people **succeed in school and how they will succeed in life**. It must also provide the flexibility for schools to succeed in their place, accommodating local priorities and reflecting local agreements and innovations, such as the proposed MBacc.

It must enable our school leaders to **focus on meeting the needs of all their children confidently** and ensure that schools do not operate as islands of success within their local area, with inspectors focusing on analysing the SEND cohort in every school and asking about whether it is representative of its community and the wider borough and that we consider **measuring school outcomes using its community catchment rather than just its on roll school community**. School leaders must also be empowered to lead in our most challenging schools, equally prioritising attainment and inclusion.

We also contend that the Governments proposed **Regional Improvement Teams should be a function of combined authorities bringing Local Authorities (LAs) and MATs together**. This would most accurately reflect that accountability and statutory responsibility

remain at place level and would be a helpful focus for partnership working with school leaders. To further concentrate this power and these teams with the DfE would be an unnecessary centralisation which risks further confusion and fragmentation in the system (see priority five below).

Ofsted inspection judgements, although important, must cease to be the only judgement on a school's & college quality, rather we need to **develop a more rounded and balanced view of school performance**. This should include a **greater emphasis on peer review** to inform school improvement planning between schools, and between Multi Academy Trusts. Enabling an equal focus on our Greater Manchester priorities, for our economy and workforce.

4. Overhaul the SEND System

A number of key policy changes over the last 12 years including assessment, curriculum, reductions in school budgets, Ofsted inspections of schools and how we measure success has meant that the school system is less inclusive. The 2014 SEND Reforms have failed. As a result of all of these factors, alongside the impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis, over a number of years we have seen an increasing number of children requiring EHCPs and there has been a move towards children requesting specialist provision with a perception that their needs cannot be met within the mainstream system.

Consequently, SEND budgets all across the country are in deficit. We need to take swift action to resolve this. This a view shared by the Secretary of State - she noted in her speech at the Confederation of School Trusts Conference, *"last month's report from the National Audit Office confirmed what parents and people in this room already knew:*

- *A system neglected to the point of crisis*
- *A system too skewed too far towards specialist provision*
- *A system failing families on every measure*

Now is the time for bold reform. And let me be clear: the direction of that reform is inclusive mainstream. That is why we will bring a new focus on improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream education settings."

Four Greater Manchester authorities, led by Manchester, are currently working with Department for Education on the **SEND change programme**. Going forward this work will continue to include a focus on supporting the development of a model for effective mainstream inclusive schools supported by a 3 tier model of alternative provision and the roll out of speech and language programme in the early years which supports children to

remain in mainstream provision. This work will inform national policy on what inclusive mainstream practice looks like, what parents and children should expect to see in every mainstream school and how this can be rolled out across all schools, what are the enablers for this and the barriers which need to be addressed.

This coupled with the work Greater Manchester has led through its **Local Attendance Action Alliance**, makes Greater Manchester the place to lead this *national ambition* to deliver inclusive mainstream schools. We will continue this work and will ensure we spread its learning across GM.

We welcome the **additional investment announced by the Government**, in the budget, and their commitment and focus on addressing the widespread failings the SEND system has. We offer the following suggestions about the system could be reformed.

Inspection and Accountability for SEND

Local Area **SEND and AP Inspections should be halted**, there is no point inspecting a broken system and those local areas waiting for inspection are all too often unable to take the kind of action which would reduce overspending because of their concerns about negative feedback which will impact on inspections. Delivering the expectations of Ofsted is we would argue fuelling the SEND funding crisis.

Instead the **School Inspection Framework should be updated emphasising the equal importance of inclusion** and be working with Local Authorities, school leaders and DFE to determine what good inclusive mainstream schools look like and therefore how the regulator can ensure that this is being implemented and is the ambition of all mainstream schools.

Changes to Statutory Duties and Guidance

We should legislate to **bring all independent special schools voluntarily under the scope of the Children and Families Act**. This would mean all schools would be under a duty to admit a child, and deliver the provision in a plan. If Independent Schools do not agree then the LA must not be required to place a child in an Independent School if the school is preferred by a parent and the Tribunal must not be able to require this.

We must then **re-focus our SEND system on what should be available in all schools to address high volume and predictable needs through a graduated response and ensure that mainstream schools are funded appropriately to do this. In particular,** a much greater focus and priority given to **speech language and communication**, which is the biggest driver of demand and when unidentified or unmet escalate into often costly

Social Emotional and Mental Health needs. Addressing this priority will require **greater investment in speech and language therapy (SALT) services** and a radical rethink of their organisation. SALT should be a LA commissioned and delivered service through the Public Health Grant.

We need to provide parents with the **same confidence at in the SEND Support Plan which should be developed and delivered by their child's schools drawing on multi agency support to help devise.** There should be no resources that a school cannot access for a child at SEND Support.

We should also ensure that the **outcomes of any permanently excluded child, remain with their initial school.** These changes will require **better guidance, support and training for schools** This will mean quickly implementing national thresholds for support and provision for all children with SEND.

Workforce development

Inclusion comes from a whole **school ethos and culture** . We must do more to support and enhance the role of the SENCOs, who should be future leaders of our schools. Ensuring that they have come through a system where they have access to all the training and development they need i.e. the 100 next leaders programme. We must also ensure that SENCOs play a greater role in influencing school culture and are part of their school leadership team. This should be supported by inclusion being equally as important to our school improvement agenda with brokered support for schools who do not meet standards.

Training and professional development for teaching assistants and school support staff must be prioritised. **School Support staff pay should recognise the vital roles they play.** Teaching Assistants should be paid a decent salary for the job they do and should be able to progress professionally as a Teaching assistant and not feel need to become a teacher or change professions to progress/earn a decent salary.

Funding and Budget Pressures

High Needs funding allocations should be reviewed and redesigned on a needs basis, with a revised funding formula, and the current **High Needs block debt written off** this is a central government pressure not a local government pressure.

High Needs allocations should be wholly based on current need not historic funding. To complement this, local areas should be required **to publish three to five year forward**

plans for sufficiency. Local Authorities should have greater flexibility to expand and to new specialist provision including special schools.

We must also **increase funding for schools** by raising the threshold (AWPU + £10k) for school contributions significantly and fully funding this increase. This should increase in line with rising costs and continue to be fully funded. We must consider how our funding model can **reward inclusion, early identification and prevention** and be better joined up with, health and social care resources.

This should be supported by a **closer focus on the use of SEND notional funding with a new MFG for notional budgets with no school receiving less per pupil than the median.** To complement this, schools should publish details of their use of its notional funding as required already for pupil premium, with this a key line of enquiry for inspectors.

Local Areas through their Schools Forums need greater freedom to **retain/top slice from all schools including academies to operate SEND Support services** for all children moving away from a statutory only and/or traded model. We need to consider how these approaches can be school led, whilst ensuring consistency in approach across a local area.

5. **Resolve the academy question and strengthen the role of the LA**

The biggest change to the school system in the last decade has been the rise of academies and multi-academy trusts. **With more than half of all schools currently academies, we must recognise how difficult it would be to reverse these changes.** However, it must be possible to create a better, more integrated system with a greater emphasis on value for money.

Beyond this pragmatic argument the case for change is simple. **Schools working in formal partnership with other schools and their local partners are better placed to succeed and better able to sustain that success.** They can offer more to families, to young people, to their staff, and can better maximise the limited resources in our system.

Our academy system is not only unfinished it is unplanned. This must be resolved. **Local Authorities working with school leaders, and in partnership with the DfE, should be asked to develop plans for a fully planned and sustainable school system** and given the powers to implement these plans. These plans should address the dual challenges our school system faces, increasing standards and improving inclusion.

It is a **perverse impact of the academisation of schools** that the policy, which intended to devolve power to schools, has in turn **centralised the oversight of schools to the DfE**. This must be addressed. It does not mean we should establish further or additional tiers of oversight. **We should simplify with MATs being more accountable at place level to communities within existing structures**. We can build on partnerships which already exist. These **partnership at local and GM level are strong**. But we also have the opportunity to improve our partnership working between schools and local and combined authorities and should **increase the role of Combined Authorities in their support of LAs to collaborate and deliver in their areas**. This could include models of QA, commissioning and also peer review, to support school improvement and accountability. This will in turn ensure that **schools are increasingly accountable to their local community**.

At the same time **we must strengthen the role of the LA**, because whilst the role and responsibilities of the LA in education is clear, in too many areas LAs do not have the powers or the resources to deliver these. We welcome the commitment in the Kings Speech to require *“all schools to co-operate with local authorities on place planning, admissions and SEND inclusion”*. We think this cooperation should include a strengthening of the LA role, **placing a duty on schools to cooperate with the LA in delivering integrated children’s services in their local area focused on prevention**, and require schools to be a named statutory partner to local safeguarding arrangements with a specific focus on **improving attendance and reducing exclusions**. In addition Local Authorities should:

1. Be required to **develop and implement plans for a planned and sustainable school system** which delivers the benefits of partnerships between schools, and with Local Authorities and combined authorities.
2. Be funded appropriately in line with their responsibilities in relation to **attendance, CME, EHE and Section 19 Alternative Provision duties**, statutory responsibilities, expectations and demand have increased by funding has not. Without resources we cannot deliver these functions well and get children back into school where appropriate.
3. Be given **back stop powers to direct the admission of children**, and powers to coordinate admissions processes and manage in year and fair access admissions.
4. Be given **powers which match their responsibilities in relation to place planning**, to expand and close schools in their area in response to demographic changes.
5. Be given **greater flexibility to manage all DSG** budgets blocks.

6. As place leader should manage **all** school capital funding with an **increased and expanded role in managing and delivering capital investment in all schools** with the LA becoming responsible for all condition funding in this as it is responsible for all basic needs funding. This should include a duty to publish medium-term Asset Management Plans for schools in their area, and a long-term plan to improve all schools in their areas to agreed national standards. This is also an area where **Combined Authorities, working together with Local Authorities, could deliver** providing the scale needed to deliver as well as a focus for wider collaboration.

6. The Importance of curriculum and assessment

In Greater Manchester, we have excellent teachers, staff and leaders across our school, colleges and providers and are proud of them and of our children and young people who achieve well. However, they are all being held back by a system that is not allowing all children to fulfil their potential and is making education providers choose between high standards and inclusivity. We strongly believe that both can and must be achieved.

We welcome the launch of the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review and the announcement that following the review all publicly funded schools, including academies will be required to follow the new national curriculum. The current national curriculum and more importantly the way in which we assess children is not fit for purpose. We want to join this work and would be willing to act as a pathfinder to implementation of these reforms- This has already been stated in the Spending Review submission to DfE.

Greater Manchester has now submitted its response to the curriculum and assessment review. We have said that to improve outcomes for children and young people across the country and in Greater Manchester, we recommend that less is more when it comes to the curriculum – it is important to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, but the focus should be on the key skills children and young people need for further study, life and a future career. These skills should be relevant to both the modern world we live in as well as relevant to local areas and the economy.

We want to do more. We **want to join this work** and would be willing to act as a pathfinder to implementation of these reforms. We agree with the Secretary of State who said in launching the review: *“This government, alongside leading education experts, leaders and staff on the frontline, will breathe new life into our outdated curriculum and assessment system. Our renewed curriculum, built on a foundation of high and rising standards, greater*

access to cultural learning and crucial work and life skills, will set up all our children to achieve and thrive in the workplaces of the future, and throughout their lives”.

However, we believe that curriculum and assessment in the Early Years must also be reviewed. As we have stated in priority one of this paper, We must move away from measuring success in the Early Years by the % of children reaching arbitrary early development milestones as this risks overstating outcomes and instead we must focus on **identifying every child who requires extra support in their early years** and make sure that they receive that support and build the skills and capabilities of all children to achieve well in school.

To improve outcomes for children and young people across the country and in Greater Manchester, we recommend that less is more when it comes to the curriculum – it is important to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, but the focus should be on the key skills children and young people need for further study, life and a future career. These skills should be relevant to both the modern world we live in as well as relevant to local areas and the economy.

7. Reform post-16 to deliver greater alignment with labour market needs and positive outcomes for learners

The reform of qualifications overall needs reconsideration, **we welcome a national post-16 strategy and wider curriculum and assessment review announced by Government.** We also believe that our curriculum and its assessment must do more to support and encourage students to study technical subjects. We are developing a **Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc)**, which will raise the bar on technical education. The MBacc will provide a clear line of sight to the local labour market by steering young people through seven “gateways” – with GCSEs aligned to each one – that lead to real jobs in the local economy.

MBacc is the vehicle through which we will achieve the vision of an integrated technical education city-region, ensuring that technical education connects more directly to the local economy and the labour market in a place. It brings sharp focus on the young people and acknowledges the key actors in the system who can enable a simpler journey for young people. It is about maintaining a relentless and unapologetic focus on the journey our young people take, rather than focusing on ‘the system’.

GM is strongly committed to effective curriculum reform and the ongoing development of the T-level. GM's FE Colleges have exceeded the national average in T-Level performance (Summer 2024) for the pass rate (94% vs 88%) and high grades (68% vs 62.7%). **However, we are particularly concerned about the impact of L3 defunding which we estimate will impact 4,454 learners across GM.** Without rapid intervention thousands of young people will not have post-16 options when the reforms unfold between 2024 and 2028.

There are a number of systemic issues in the post-16 system that the review should look at – we have highlighted English & maths and sufficiency as particular issues for GM: **English and Maths Attainment:** Last year 62.8% of young people in GM achieved a Grade 4 pass in English and Maths compared to 65.1% nationally. Colleges are struggling to recruit maths teachers and attendance/motivation of students is dropping when even less of the course is focused on their chosen vocational area. Access for young people to technical education pathways at Level 3 and beyond are affected by a **sufficiency gap at post 16.**

In GM we have a growing demographic of 16–18-year-olds, projected to continue to 2028 and then plateau, and our colleges are facing challenges in funding this growth, identifying available space to deliver from, and recruiting the workforce with industry related expertise.

We would like to explore opportunities to test flexibilities in funding and accountability in GM as well as looking again and funding for further education colleges (16-18) to address the anomalies and disincentives in the current system. Including the devolution of all capital funding linked to post-16 education and skills. A lack of post-16 places, narrowing of technical pathways and declining apprenticeship opportunities for young people all add to the **growing number of young people not in employment education or training (NEET) in GM.**

Connecting all parts of the system is critical to ensure all young people can participate and have clear pathways to the GM economy. The Mbacc in year 2 will start to focus on 'pathways for all' ensuring inclusion and supported focus- **this is where the connection to the VRU is key.**

Since its launch, the VRU has worked with schools, colleges, hospitals, police, criminal justice partners, charities, and most crucially with communities. The VRU's objective has been to tackle violence and its root causes, with a primary focus on children, young people, and families. The VRU has provided a multi-million-pound investment and commissioned a range of interventions to help achieve these ambitions. Key programmes have included

community sports, targeted mentoring, support for parents, work in primary and secondary schools, youth work in hospitals and in the community.

Taken together with a focus on participation and reducing NEET & youth unemployment then the MBacc can ensure pathways for all.

8. The **best place to teach** and work in education

We know how important **brilliant teachers, educators, lecturers and school support staff** are and we believe Greater Manchester can be the best place to teach and work in education. However, the challenge we face is great, and **want to lead on these much needed initiatives.**

We know these **issues of both recruitment and retention issues are persisting**⁹ and that the number of teachers who are considering leaving the profession increased by 44 per cent in 2022/23. We also know that the challenges we face in school are replicated in our Early Years (see above) and Further Education sectors where pay and funding issues are even more pronounced.

We must take **bold and decisive action in order to address these challenges.** Greater Manchester has fantastic assets, its colleges, universities, teaching schools and other training providers are outstanding. Greater **local control over priorities and flexibility to utilise existing funding and coordination of resources** could have a profound impact. To do this we need:

1. A **fair and equitable settlement for further education**
2. A re-think about how **we attract and train colleagues in the Early Years** sector, (see priority one) building on our **Early Years workforce competency framework** this could include placing **greater emphasis on apprenticeships** in the Early Years, developing an '**Early Years First**' model for school leavers, similar to the Teach First graduate approach. This model would support young people into the profession whilst in full-time employment. It would embrace the high turn-over of staff.
3. **More local control of the resources made available to teaching schools and teacher training providers** (i.e. Teach First), this would enable us to target our work to our local workforce and performance challenges and to join up our activity all the way from the early years to work.

We will, working together with school leaders, teaching schools and providers design and implement a *best place to teach plan* for Greater Manchester. This plan building on brilliant work already underway will bring together discussions on training, CPD, and leadership

development, more closely with our other key policy priorities on areas such as transport, housing and the economy. With a focus on our challenges and opportunities in the early years, schools and further education.