

GMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7th February 2024

Subject: School Readiness Update

Report of: Councillor Mark Hunter Portfolio Lead for Children and Young People and
Caroline Simpson Portfolio Lead Chief Executive for Children and Young
People.

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an update on the Greater Manchester School Readiness programme, including an update on early years performance in Greater Manchester and the trajectory for early years outcomes since the covid pandemic in 2020.
- Discuss the potential impact of the national policy reforms to funded early education entitlements, in relation to early year outcomes.
- Outline work within the programme focused on addressing the ongoing inequalities gap in the early years.

Recommendations:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked:

1. To note the contents of the report and identify any areas for further scrutiny;
2. Give consideration to how it can inform the refresh of the GM School Readiness Strategy.

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Report authors must identify which paragraph relating to the following issues:

BOLTON
BURY

MANCHESTER
OLDHAM

ROCHDALE
SALFORD

STOCKPORT
TAMESIDE

TRAFFORD
WIGAN

Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment:

The latest performance data for child development and school readiness, discussed in section 2 of this paper, highlights the ongoing impact of the covid pandemic on early years and continues to highlight how children growing up experiencing poverty and disadvantage have been disproportionately impacted. Section 3 of the paper also discusses the potential impact of the national policy reforms for funded early education entitlements, which risk widening the inequalities attainment gap at age 5. The report outlines the work underway within the GMCA School Readiness programme to respond to both these challenges.

Risk Management

N/A

Legal Considerations

N/A

Financial Consequences – Revenue

Resourcing of the current programme is discussed in section 1.2. Funding is non recurrent and due to end in March 2025.

3.3.Financial Consequences – Capital

N/A

Number of attachments to the report: 0

Background Papers

- School Readiness Update Report to Corporate Issues & Reform Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 8 March 2022
- Greater Manchester Strategy Progress Report to the GMCA – Autumn 2023

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? No

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Introduction/Background

- 1.1. Improving school readiness at age 5, continues to be a priority for Greater Manchester and is a key priority within the GM Children and Young People's programme and a shared, system priority within the Integrated Care Partnership strategy. Since 2019, GMCA has led delivery of the GM School Readiness transformation programme as a key policy priority within the Public Service Reform agenda.
- 1.2. The current programme of work was mobilised in 2019 and funded through an initial investment of £2.1m from the GM Health and Social Care Partnership, with an additional £1m funding provided in 2021/22 to support covid recovery priorities.
- 1.3. Oversight and accountability for the programme is provided through the GM School Readiness Programme Board, Chaired by Chris McLoughlin from Stockport Council, on behalf of the GM Directors' of Children's Social Care. The Board includes Early Years Strategic Leads from all 10 localities, representation from NHS GM Integrated Care, the education sector and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. The programme board reports into the GM Children and Young People's Board.
- 1.4. The programme has focussed on closing the gap with national performance rates for school readiness, through strong system integration, early identification of family need by universal services and delivery of evidence-based interventions. The programme is structured around delivery of activity within three priority strands, identified below.
 - 1.4.1. **Developing an evidence-based model.** Further development and implementation of an evidence-based model for improving early years outcomes, with a focus on rollout of a universal 18month assessment; high quality research and innovation partnerships; strengthening integrated working in the first 1,001 critical days.

1.4.2. Embedding best practice pathways. The GM Early Years Delivery Model (EYDM) includes several evidence-based pathways focused on universal and targeted provision that supports early intervention. The current programme of work focuses on developing and strengthening new and existing pathways that support speech and language; physical development and social-emotional development and wellbeing. Since 2020, this has included ensuring pathways are responsive to the impact of the covid pandemic on child development.

1.4.3. Developing system enablers. Activity within this priority focuses on developing integrated digital solutions to strengthen data sharing and insights; high quality, accessible early education provision that supports covid recovery, and strengthening our integrated early years workforce.

1.5. A deep dive review of the programme was completed in winter 2021/22 to support with refreshing priorities and ensuring the programme remained responsive to the impact of the covid pandemic. Activities and deliverables continue to remain agile, to ensure added value to locality work and alignment to the changing national policy context, particularly the modernisation of the Healthy Child Programme, the expansion of funded early education for under 2-year-olds of working parents and the introduction of Family Hub models to provide place-based family help and support from pregnancy to age 19.

2. School Readiness Performance

2.1. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, GM used the Good Level of Development (GLD) measure as the headline performance indicator for school readiness, in line with the approach taken by Ofsted and the Department for Education. This measure is based on an assessment of all children at the end of reception (5 years old), using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), and is intended to provide a reliable, valid, and accurate assessment of a child's development at a point in time.

2.2. EYFSP assessments were cancelled during the pandemic, so there is no available data for academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21. During this period, the national and local context surrounding GLD also changed considerably due to the introduction of EYFS reforms in September 2021. As a result, GLD data from academic year 2021/22 onwards is not comparable with historic data – however it remains helpful for benchmarking GM performance relative to the national average.

2.3. In part due to these challenges, the current Greater Manchester Strategy (GMS) performance framework moves away from the GLD measure and instead focuses on the expected level of development at age 2-2.5 years, measured at the universal child development review. This aims to provide a more meaningful 'leading indicator' of child development and reflects particular concern over the impact of the pandemic restrictions, and ongoing universal service disruption, on expectant and new parents and babies since 2020.

2.4. Prior to the start of the pandemic, school readiness for all pupils had been steadily improving in Greater Manchester. In the academic year 2018/19, 68.2 percent of children achieved GLD, compared with 71.8 percent nationally.

2.5. We were beginning to see the impact from our targeted focus on inequalities and had closed the GLD gap with the England average for children eligible for free school meals. This is despite having higher levels of deprivation than England as a whole. However, outcomes for this cohort remained 12 percentage points behind the GM average.

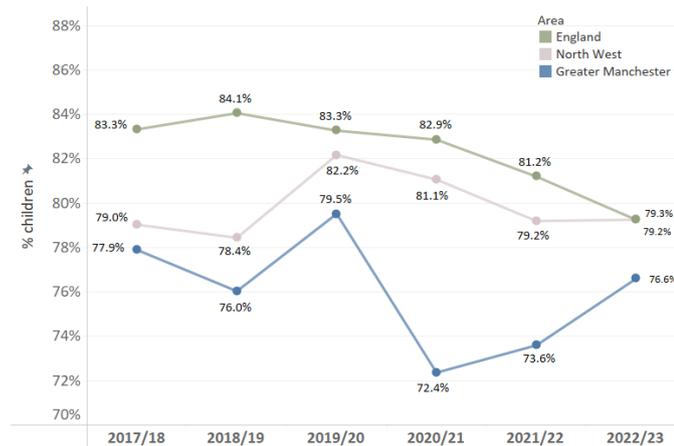
2.6. Data since 2020 highlights the profound impact of the pandemic and associated restrictions on the development of children under 5. However, we are beginning to see green shoots emerging, with early evidence that covid recovery strategies in GM are having a positive impact.

2.7. Child Development Outcomes at age 2-2.5 years

2.7.1. This measure is based on data collected by health visitors during the Healthy Child Programme 2-year review, or integrated review which uses the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) tool. This captures overall child development based on five areas: communication; gross motor skills; fine motor skills; problem solving; and personal-social development.

2.7.2. Chart 1 shows recent improvements to child development outcomes at age 2-2.5 years. Although GM remains below the England average, there is a positive trend since the initial decline in outcomes in 2020/21. Data for 2022/23 shows 76.6 percent of children in GM met the expected level of development across all 5 domains, compared with 79.3 percent nationally. This gap is the narrowest it has been since before the pandemic and the positive trajectory for children in GM contrasts with the England average which continues to decline.

Chart 1: Child development outcomes at age 2 - 2.5 years 2017 - 2023



2.7.3. The GMS target is to close the gap with the national average, so that 81 percent of 2-year-olds in GM are achieving the expected level of development by April 2024. If the current trend continues, GM is on track to achieve this target.

2.7.4. Despite the overall improvement, there is ongoing spatial variation in outcomes with performance ranging from 59.2 percent to 89.6 percent across the city region. Following the latest GMS update, a cross policy area review has taken place and identified opportunities to explore and strengthen existing approaches.

2.8. School Readiness Outcomes at age 5

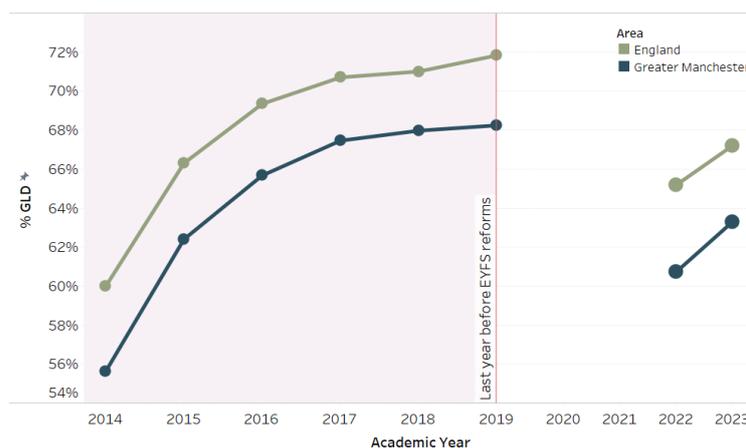
2.8.1. GLD data returned in academic year 2021/22 and provided an early opportunity to explore the impact of the pandemic and the closure of schools and early years settings on children's attainment in GM.

2.8.2. Data for 2021/22 confirmed the impact of the pandemic on school readiness at age 5, with a widening of the attainment gap between children in GM and the England average. The data also highlight the disproportionate impact of the covid pandemic on children growing up in disadvantage in GM, with a widening of the attainment gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers in GM and with the England average for this cohort.

2.8.3. The recently published data for the academic year 2022/23 provides the first comparison year since the reforms to the EYFSP. When reviewing early years data since 2020, it is important to recognise the specific and unique experiences of each cohort during 2020/21. Children included in the 2022/23 GLD data were born between September 2017, and August 2018. The oldest of them would, therefore, have been around 2.5 years old when Covid arrived, the youngest around 18 months old.

2.8.4. Data for 2022/23 shows outcomes are improving. 63.3 percent of children in GM achieved GLD, this is an increase from 60.7 percent from the previous year. GM performance remains 3.9 percentage points behind the England average (67.2 percent), however chart 2 shows that this gap is beginning to narrow following the initial widening post pandemic.

Chart 2: Percentage of children achieving GLD 2014 - 2023

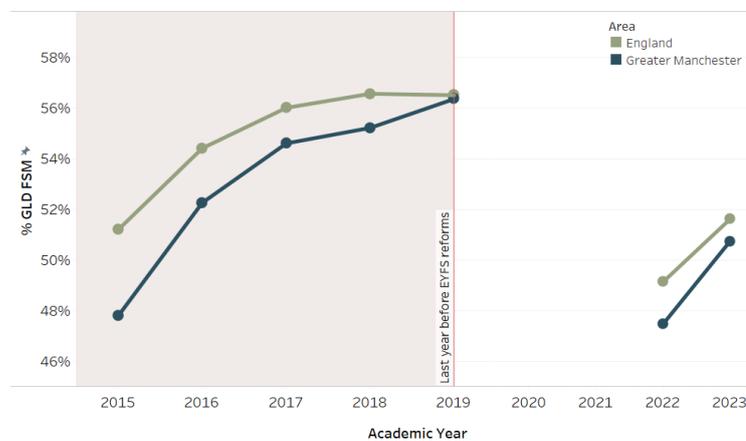


2.8.5. All localities have seen an increase in their GLD from 2021/22; with four areas seeing an increase above 3 percentage points; Manchester, Salford, Rochdale, and Oldham. However, all localities remain below their pre-pandemic performance and there is notable variance in performance across the city region with average GLD ranging from 58.5 percent to 72.1 percent.

2.8.6. For children growing up in more disadvantaged communities the data is also improving but there remains a significant inequalities gap in the early years; reflecting that where you are born in GM continues to impact on your life chances.

2.8.7. For 2022/23, 50.7 percent of children eligible for free school meals in GM achieved GLD, compared with the England average of 51.6 percent. Six localities have seen an increase in GLD for this cohort, a welcome trend given the overarching disadvantage attainment gap; and the gap between GM and the England average has narrowed. However, in seven localities less than half of this cohort are achieving GLD. There are opportunities to learn from the areas with greatest improvement for this cohort, notably Oldham, Manchester, Wigan and Rochdale where performance increase ranged from 8.9 to 3.5 percentage points.

Chart 4: Percentage of children eligible for free school meals achieving GLD 2014 – 2023



2.8.8. Applying a gender lens to the latest EYFSP data also highlights a persistent gender attainment gap, with 56.5 percent of boys in GM achieving GLD compared with 70.4 percent of girls. There has been some improvement in performance of boys in GM over the last 12 months, however, applying FSM eligibility identifies that this improvement reflects an uplift in the performance of boys in more affluent contexts. Therefore, the attainment gap between boys eligible for free school meals and their peers in GM has widened.

2.9. Take up of 2 year funded early education entitlement

2.9.1. In recognition of the significant inequalities gap in the early years, the GMS outcomes framework includes a performance measure focused on take up of the 2-year funded early education entitlement (FEEE). This measure is one of three pilot measures within the GMS focused on a neighbourhood spatial footprint and reflects a commitment to levelling up within GM where there is variance across and within localities.

- 2.9.2. All 10 GM localities have committed to focus on one prioritised neighbourhood where take up of the funded early education offer for two-year olds (if certain criteria are met) is low or resistant to change compared to other neighbourhoods in the locality. In order to promote a targeted understanding and response, the floor target ambition is that by April 2024, take up in each of these neighbourhoods will have improved, reducing the gap with the rest of the locality.
- 2.9.3. Overall performance on this indicator suggests that we are seeing positive trends against our floor target ambition. As of summer 2023, data shows sustained positive progress against the GMS floor target. Eight of the ten priority neighbourhoods have increased take up from the previous measurement point and all ten localities have increased take up rates in their prioritised neighbourhood compared to the baseline. This equates to approximately 879 more children taking up the offer across GM.
- 2.9.4. The latest official data from the Department for Education show that the GM take up rate in January 2023 was 77.2%, demonstrating a return to pre-pandemic levels (an improvement of 9.6 percentage points since January 2021). However, given that substantial variation remains across the city-region, locally sourced data remain an important tool in seeking a spatially differentiated response, as pursued under the floor target approach.

3. The role of early education in addressing inequalities in the early years

- 3.1. 27.2 percent of children aged 0-15 are living in low-income households in GM; these levels of deprivation will mean that closing the overall early years attainment gap requires a concerted focus on levelling up and improving outcomes for children, particularly boys, experiencing poverty and deprivation.¹
- 3.2. The inclusion of the 2-year FEEE indicator in the GMS outcomes framework reflects the importance of high-quality early education in improving the life chances of children growing up experiencing disadvantage. Work is ongoing to identify and share learning from the specific strategies and activities driving improved performance across GM; the termly bespoke GM reporting cycle provides a frequent, granular level of reporting that is underpinning a continuous review and learn cycle within the School Readiness programme, supported by locality Early Education leads.

- 3.3. However, the national policy focussed on the expansion of funded early education entitlements for 0–2-year-olds of working parents poses a challenge to addressing existing inequalities in the early years. The new entitlements will mean that children of working parents are eligible for 30 hours of funded early education from the term after the child reaches 9 months; for children where parents are not working this will only be 15 hours from the term after the child is 2.
- 3.4. This policy layers additional disadvantage on children who are most in need of support in their earliest years and is likely to lead to widening of the attainment gap in the early years. Research from the Sutton Trust has highlighted the negative impact on children growing up in disadvantage, of the extended entitlements for 3- and 4-year-olds, where children qualify for an additional 15 hours if both parents are working.²
- 3.5. The new policy also risks potential the unintended consequence that providers will prioritise places for children of working parents, at the expense of children eligible for the targeted 2-year-old entitlement due to family circumstances and income levels. Children of working parents are more likely to require additional hours (above the funded entitlement) and be in a position to pay subsistence costs.
- 3.6. The GM programme is responding to these challenges through lobbying for an expansion of eligibility to *all* children under 2; support for localities with workforce sufficiency, quality and building the case for a fair funding model to support progress on pay levels within sector.

4. School Readiness Programme Delivery Update

- 4.1. The focus on addressing inequalities in the early years is central to programme delivery plans and wider activity beyond early education. Key areas of progress and achievements realised between April 2022 and March 2024 include:

² The Sutton Trust, *A Fair Start? Equalising access to early education*, August 2021.

- 4.1.1. Rollout of the GM Early Years workforce competency framework to strengthen early years practice across the integrated workforce.** The framework aims to provide a common language to describe the workforce competencies that support child development and supports practitioners and localities with identifying areas for practice improvement. It also aims to ensure that pre and post qualifying training programmes support with readiness to practice. The framework is currently being rolled out in two early adopter localities: Stockport and Tameside. Learning from this phase will inform wider rollout.
- 4.1.2. Improved workforce training and support in delivery of interventions** that focus on speech, language and communication, physical development, and social and emotional development. This includes securing grant funding from the Education Endowment Foundation to develop a GM workforce training and support package for use of the WellComm early language intervention in early years settings.
- 4.1.3. Commissioning of universal and targeted programmes to support with prevention and early intervention in early years settings.** This includes rollout of the Think Equal programme, that supports pro-social behaviours and emotional wellbeing in the early years, across 960 reception classes and 600 nurseries in GM. Rollout has been jointly funded by £250,000 of investment from GMCA, GM NHS and the GM Violence Reduction Unit and directly responds to the impact of the covid pandemic on the social, emotional development and wellbeing of under 5s.
- 4.1.4. Development of universal child development resources aimed at parents and the integrated early years workforce.** This includes the GM 10 Top Tips for Talking/Moving and Thriving, digital films to model parent-child verbal interaction and access to quality assured universal and targeted advice via the Essential Parent eCare platform, now commissioned in nine localities.
- 4.1.5. Ongoing rollout of the GM Early Years integrated digital solution** to support the digitisation of child development assessments to enable improved collation and sharing of data across families and different professional groups. The digital solution now being used in four localities for ASQ3 assessments and two localities for WellComm assessments in early years settings.

4.2. The current period of funding for this phase of transformation activity is due to end in March 2025. Work has begun to engage stakeholders in development of a refreshed GM School Readiness strategy that focusses on addressing the ongoing challenges to improving outcomes and reflects and responds to the local and national policy context. Delivery priorities to March 2025 are set out below.

4.2.1. **Pilot of integrated 20-week antenatal contact as part of the *Fairer Start Local* partnership.** This 3-year partnership between GMCA/Stockport and Nesta uses innovation methodologies to design solutions that aim to improve early years outcomes. The focus of the final year of the project will be the implementation and evaluation of enhanced integrated working between midwifery and Health Visitors, focussing on improved coordination and communication, collaborative training, the use of a single assessment tool and delivery of a 20week joint visit for women on the enhanced pathway, grounded in relational practice. Subject to evaluation, a toolkit to support wider rollout of this way of working across GM will also be developed.

4.2.2. **Nuffield funded 5-year research project: Childrens' Information; Improving Lives through better listening and better data'**, focussing on how "data" and "voice" can be used to improve the lives of children and families. Work over the last 2 years has focused on Oldham and Rochdale, testing how the use of information can be strengthened to address local priorities including speech, language and communication and provision of early education. Learning will inform wider work within the GM programme and support stronger use of data and information in service design and practice.

4.2.3. **Developing the economic case for rollout of the universal 18-month assessment**, through completion of a cost-benefit analysis to support work to spread and scale this model across GM. There is already a strong evidence base for the benefits of this assessment for child development, however delivery is variable across the city region due to workforce capacity to deliver.

4.2.4. **Contributing to wider transformation work to redesign the 0-19 speech, language, and communication pathway to align with the *Balanced System* principles.** This will improve access and timeliness of support, reduce demand on specialist therapy services and improve outcomes for children.

- 4.2.5. **Further integration of early years and early help services within the context of family hubs** to ensure a minimum, consistent offer across Family Hubs in the city region, with universal and targeted support for families reflective of place-based need.
- 4.2.6. **Development of the GM Infant Pledge** to provide best practice guidance for public sector services that focus on putting the needs of young children front and center across public services.
- 4.2.7. **Strengthening and reducing variance in early years pathways** - launch of pathway guidance for social-emotional development and wellbeing pathway, further work to build capacity at a universal and targeted level to support physical development. Support for the GM perinatal and parent-infant mental health pathway including addressing the gap in specialist and targeted infant mental health provision for 2- to 5-year-olds.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. The covid pandemic had a significant impact on families and children under 5 in GM, negatively impacting child development and increasing existing inequalities in the early years. Over the last three years the GMCA School Readiness programme has supported localities to address these challenges and there is now emerging evidence of improved performance in child development outcomes at age 2 and school readiness outcomes at age 5. However, the latest outcomes data highlights that entrenched inequalities remain in school readiness levels for specific population groups, including children experiencing poverty and disadvantage and boys.
- 5.2. The GMCA School Readiness programme has plans in place over the next 12 months focussed on further work to address these challenges and working with the localities and wider partners to respond to new challenges posed by the national policy reforms to funded early education entitlements.
- 5.3. Work in 2024/25 will also include a refresh of the GM School Readiness strategy, informed by the evidence base, locality priorities and hearing from families about their day to day lived experience.